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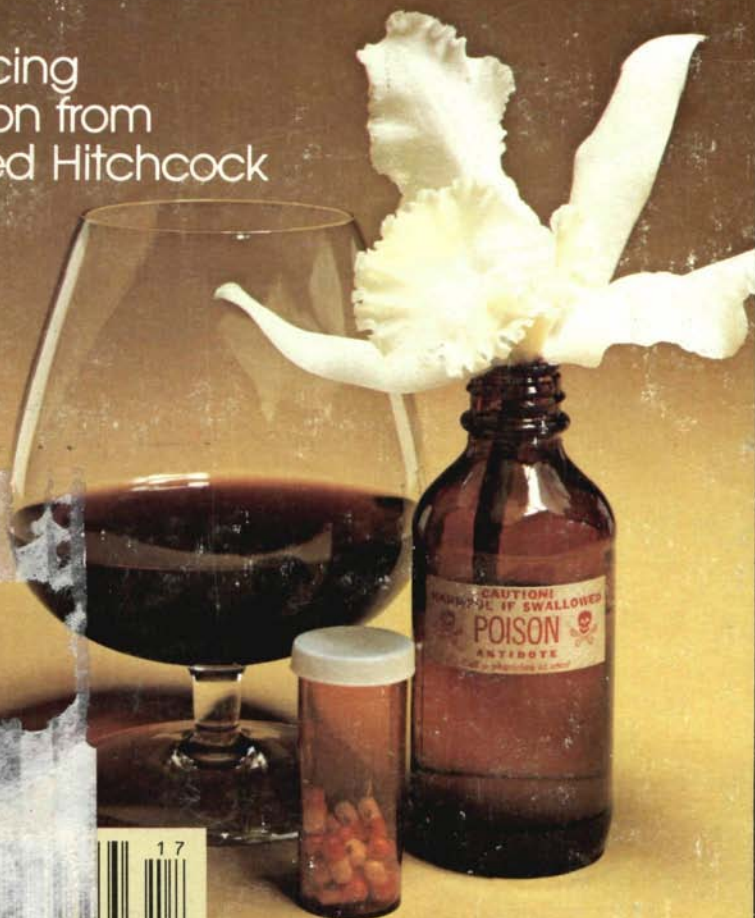
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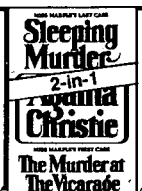
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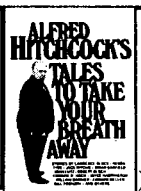
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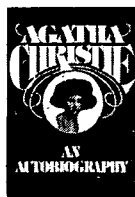
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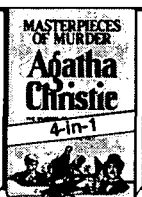
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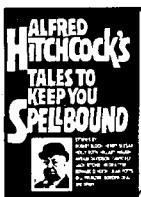
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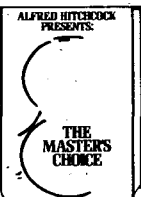
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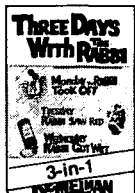
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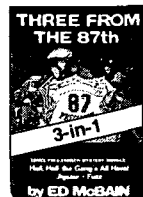
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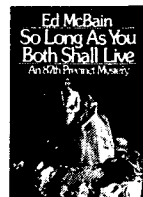
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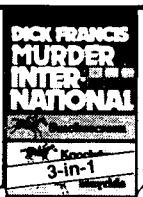


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April 29, 1981



Dear Reader:

A shootout in an Old West town might not seem exactly the stuff detective stories are made of, but this month's novelette, "The Afternoon Blood Show" by Jim Beaver, introduces an Old West tourist attraction where one of the bullets turns out to be real and you can't always tell the good guys from the bad guys, even if they're wearing the right color hats.

A stockbroker plots against his wife in Nancy C. Swoboda's "Portfolio for Murder." The shadier side of the legal profession is uncovered in "The Lie Detector" by James McKimmey and in "P." by Robert Twohy. A professor is the victim of another plot in Charlene Weir's "The Gold Key." Sheriff Gates and Julio investigate a forty-year-old crime in Stephen Wasylyk's "The Runaways," and a couple of ex-criminals attempt to go straight in "Hard Evidence" by Chuck Swope. And Gary Alexander shows that even crime on skid row may not be exactly what it seems to be in his moving story, "The Confession."

Good reading.

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Justice can be absurd . . .

by **ROBERT
TWOHY**



Some years ago a professor of law at an Ivy League university married a girl from a nearby town, where everyone who knew her thought he must be a damn fool. He wasn't, but he was a lot more naive about women than a forty-two-year-old man should be.

The champagne bubbles were still spinning around in his head when she had her first extramarital affair.

With one of his students.

Time passed, bringing other adventures into her life. The professor wasn't even slightly upset. He never had an inkling.

His little blonde bride thought that theirs was the perfect marriage. She had prestige, a darling little house on campus, and proximity to acres of sturdy young swains ripe and ready for the picking—and her husband told her that he'd never been happier. What more could be asked of a marriage?

None of his colleagues tried to tip him off, because they had always considered him a stuck-up prig and rather enjoyed seeing him sprouting horns.

He had no idea how the wind blew until almost a full school year had slipped by—when, in April, the lady failed to destroy a note.

It lay on the floor of their bedroom. How she had got so careless after disposing of all previous evidence isn't known. But there it was, right in the open, and the professor picked it up and read it.

"Winnie—I'll cut The Worm's lecture Tues. and be over 8 sharp. We'll have 2 hr. of *zowee!*—P."

He didn't know who P. was, but could guess what *zowee* was, and had no doubt who The Worm was—himself. He was due to give a lecture at 8:00 that evening, which was Tuesday.

He didn't say anything about the note to Winnie as she bounced around, partially smashed as usual on secret sherry. She was busy fixing him a dinner of sorts and kissing the air in his direction and giving off bubbly noises, and did not observe that for once he wasn't in a condition of simpering idiocy at her cavortings. He sat still and silent, in his eyes the look of someone who's been savoring a mouthful of gooey candy and suddenly realized that all his fillings have been jerked out. But with the glow she had on, and excited by the prospect of a really fun evening, she failed to catch the change in the wind.

Eight o'clock. The professor sat at his desk in the lecture room, gazing at the scholarly assemblage. He didn't see it. He saw nothing. Nothing but his wife's sparkling, lying eyes.

His own eyes had gone flat and shiny and strange.

He didn't take the roll. Which was too bad—he could have found out later which young men weren't in attendance. At the time it seemed of no importance—he planned to meet P. in person in just a few minutes.

He stood up suddenly and grabbed his lean belly. The class looked

moderately interested for perhaps the first time all semester. "Sudden attack—old chronic illness—class dismissed for tonight—"

He lurched to the door and out, got in his car, and whipped on home.

He parked half a block away and took the lug wrench from the trunk. He slid up the block, ducking as he passed neighbors' hedges, through his own gate and up the walk, got out his key, turned it and the knob, pushed the door open, stepped inside, and shut it softly behind him. At the foot of the stairs he paused. From above came soprano and baritone giggles and murmurs.

He climbed toward them.

What he saw in the bedroom was what he'd expected to see.

Dim moonlight shone through the window on pale flesh quickly untangling. Winnie's thin voice implored, "Joseph? Don't, Joseph, don't! Please don't—"

He had a glimpse of a waxy shape sliding from the bed in one rapid motion, but his attention was on the huddled, cringing form of his wife. Forward with the lug wrench, smash, scream, crash, crush, scream. Slash, crash, scream, groan, sigh. Worm in eruption.

He was alone in the room with his wife. She lay flat on the bed as if stuck there by her blood. Her wide blue eyes were far away—they wouldn't be back.

After the rapid movement of pallid flesh fleeing, the professor hadn't noticed anything—only his wife. Had stood over her and watched the juices bursting out of her as the wrench did its work.

Dumbly he turned from her savaged body, looked around. There was no evidence P. had ever been there. No heap of men's clothes—not even a stray sock. He went to the door and looked down the stairs. No red tracks led down. Apparently no blood had stained P.'s nimble feet—he'd gotten away clean.

The professor laid the wrench on the floor, went to the phone, and called the police.

The trial was three months later. P. was the missing ingredient that gave the case a certain glamour and mystery: did he or did he not exist?

Yes, said the defendant's lawyer.

No, said the prosecutor. "A note is said to have triggered this night of horror, a note signed P. But no note has been produced in evidence—no note exists. And P. does not exist."

The professor could never remember what he had done with the note. With everything depending on it, he couldn't remember.

The State did not challenge the evidence that the bride had had numerous affairs. "Indeed," the prosecutor said, "they were undoubtedly the motive for this horrible crime. The defendant, becoming aware finally of what had been known to a great many—that his wife had consistently flouted her marriage vows—decided to avenge himself upon her—she would pay for her infidelity with her life!"

He paced about, a small man with a heavy black moustache, shooting dark glances at the professor, who sat very still in his chair, looking more than ever (thought his students present) like a worm.

"Professor Millby is an intelligent man. He knew well that her murder would come home to him—there was no escape from that inevitability. But still she must pay. He had to make her pay! A score must be settled!"

He crouched, his luminous eyes darting in various directions, plucking his moustache as if seeking to rid it of fleas, and scuttled furtively back and forth—presenting a crude quick sketch of a dastard plotting dastardly. Ludicrous? Certainly to the detached observer. But the prosecutor gave not a rat's foot for the opinion of the detached observer. He was after the jury's attention.

He got it. They watched him, enthralled.

This prosecutor set no worth on appeals to a jury's intelligence. "Save your time," was his advice to new assistants. "Hit 'em in the gut—that's where they live. You think a summation is hokey? Great! Make it hokier. The more you pour it on the more they'll believe. They don't want reality, facts, reason, all that dull stuff—give 'em entertainment! They'll love you for it, and when it's verdict time, they'll reward you for not boring them or making them think!"

He was partly joking—but only partly. This prosecutor, like most comedians, carried a fair load of cynicism.

"So," he resumed to the Millby jury, leaving off the pacing and moustache-tweaking and impaling them now on the rays that seemed to dart from his luminous eyes, "he gets an idea. He'll invent a story, a cover story—a man was with her! A lover was with her! And he came home early from class and found them together—and a red rage came over him! He was in the grip of an uncontrollable fury!"

Maddened grimaces, clutching fingers, fantastically rolling eyes. The jury loved it. The spectators did too.

He calmed down somewhat. "Never mind that Millby had brought the lug wrench upstairs with him—never mind that. The defense says he has no memory of bringing it up. He has no memory of anything after leaving the classroom until he stood in the door of the bedroom and saw his wife and her lover there. And then, we are told, his red rage took over."

He gifted the jury with a thin, sardonic smile. "Let us talk of red rage, of uncontrollable fury. Not insanity—oh, no, we've heard no plea that Joseph Millby was insane—no, he's too obviously completely sane. They could not hope to foist *that* fraud off on you!" A quick, contemptuous smirk at the defense table. "No, what is promulgated here is not insanity but a brand-new doctrine—what perhaps I can coin a phrase for, and refer to as *diminished capacity*. In other words, this defendant is completely sane, yes, but you see—" his voice developed a wheedling whine "—he suddenly got an attack of *diminished capacity*, which naturally left him unable to refrain from smashing his wife thirty-seven times with a lug wrench—"

"Objection! The defense never used any such term *diminished capacity*!"

"You can't object during my summation. I never said you said it. I just made it up—giving a name to your amazing new doctrine. Maybe—" a conspiratorial leer to the jury "—it'll catch on. A great new ploy to get guilty murderers off when they're obviously sane. Don't bet it won't be picked up on—not again in our state, I trust, but maybe in one of the weirder states like California. May I proceed?" he inquired with stately coldness.

The defense muttered, "I wish you'd base some of your summation on the evidence."

"Evidence? *Evidence?* You speak of evidence?" His voice had risen to the pitch of a demented rat. He whirled to the jury. "He *gives* us no evidence! He tells of a note but gives us no note—no note signed P., or D., or XYZ! He speaks of a lover and gives us no evidence of a lover—no fingerprints, no bloodstains, no personal possessions, no scrap or stitch of clothing to show that a lover was in that room! No eyewitnesses to the lover's arrival or departure. The entire eight o'clock class has been interviewed individually, and no knowledge of P. is discovered. All students in the class with first, last, or middle names beginning with P. have been investigated as to their possible connection with the victim and their whereabouts at eight o'clock that night—and all have been cleared."

He plucked his moustache, this time slowly, ruminatively. Then, as if light had suddenly dawned, he whirled, pinioned the defendant with his eyes, and spoke in a deadly whisper that could be heard throughout the courtroom.

"Is this a sinister, obscene joke by you, Joseph Millby? Do you think to laugh at the law and society, and arrogantly assume that no one will see through your superior wit and intelligence? Did you not decide on the letter P. because—*P stands for phantom?*"

Several jurors gasped audibly as this dazzling insight was stunningly brought forth.

The professor sat still, gazing back at the prosecutor, his face without expression. He knew what the prosecutor was doing to him, that this was theater of the absurd as staged by a master—and things had reached such a point that any expression he assumed would be taken as proof of perfidy and intellectualism. No expression at all was no better, really—but there you were. Or there *he* was.

He had been sketched, by deft strokes of the prosecutor throughout the trial, as a man any decent juror would love to hate. So they did—they adored him for his villainy. He knew that they were righteously going to throw the book at him. They cared not for red rages—and they didn't believe in P.

The prosecutor, leaving his pinioned prey, turned back to the jury. His voice was now low, with a superb quaver. "Can you imagine any student of our great university—even the lowest, the most abject—can you imagine him leaping from that bed, grabbing his clothes, rushing away into the night—doing nothing to aid his beloved in her agony? You cannot. I cannot. The world cannot. But *he* can!" Dreadful finger outthrust at the professor. "*He* can imagine it! And did! He imagined it all! Carefully, deliberately, like a writer plotting a story—and the story is fiction. Fiction—all fiction! P. is fiction. No lover was there in that room of blood and carnage—only Millby's wife, alone in the bed, sweetly asleep, when he came on the scene with his lug wrench and his diabolical thirst for vengeance. There was no rage, red or any other color—just the cold, systematic slaughter of a defenseless woman who, whatever her faults, did not deserve to die like that!"

He gripped the edge of the jury box, and his eyes were huge, yearning for the jurors to reach into the deep well of understanding and wisdom that resided within the bosom of each and every one of them. "Throw

it back to him! Throw the lie back to him! Tell him No, Professor Joseph Millby! No, no—NO!” He smashed a fist on the edge of the jury box, heedless that the blow might fracture some small bones. Perhaps it did—he flopped his hand at the wrist and for a second looked a little appalled. Then, thrusting his hand into the front of his coat, he paced, hooked his lip with his teeth, shook his head quickly, rising above personal pain, and carried on, in tones now grim and sonorous.

“No. No, Joseph Millby, we’ve had enough! We reject your smiling lies! You will not prance from this American courtroom with a grin and a chuckle to, on some later date perhaps, lay your steaming hand on another lug wrench—”

“Objection!”

“This is still summation! On another lug wrench, or maybe even the *very selfsame lug wrench*, still stained with the blood of your first victim—”

“Objection!”

“—and smash and destroy another beautiful young woman deep in the depths of tender, vulnerable sleep!”

He staggered, moisture in his haunted eyes—his hand hurt like hell—toward his chair, then paused to fling one last harpoon.

“Enough, Joseph Millby! The ordinary, the decent, the non-intellectual citizens of this great state cry out to you. *We have had enough!*”

The jury did not applaud as he fell into his chair, but they looked as if they wanted to.

And after a decent interval they came back and found the defendant guilty of everything the prosecutor had laid on him. The judge saw no particular reason not to give him life, and did.

Thirteen years later, in 1971, he was released.

He became a freelance odd-job man and a permanent drunk. He stumbled haphazardly across the country and wound up in a California town called Lindenvale. Nine years later he was still there—on welfare now, and a regular fixture at a low-grade bar called Pete’s Place, where many of the broken-down old wrecks of the town spent most of the time they had left. There he drank ale, read the local and San Francisco papers, talked with other ancient mariners, and off and on wondered who P. was, or if maybe the prosecutor had been right and he *had* imagined it all—the note and the pallid body moving swiftly away from the bed.

One day in May he had an answer.

Turning the pages of the wretchedly edited *Lindenvale Standard*, he came on a feature story, bylined Barbara Miles—a gushy interview with a famous San Francisco attorney, Herman N. Wandworth. The professor had heard of him—who in the Bay Area had not? You read in the San Francisco papers of his court activities and his social and charitable activities, you read tidbits in the gossip columns, you saw him on local talk shows. (The professor never had—he had a TV in his room, but it didn't work.) A broad-faced man with round cheeks, amused eyes, a head of fine hair, prematurely and elegantly white. Some called him the greatest criminal lawyer in the whole Golden State.

He was known as a friend of the poor, taking cases for no fee. He received a good deal of publicity for that, and between these freebies managed to slide in a good number of lucrative jobs. He had made a great deal of money and there was some speculation that he was considering a run for governor. This particular article in the Lindenvale rag tied in with that notion—a trial balloon. As with a play that might or might not make it to Broadway after seeing how it plays in the sticks, Wandworth might be launching an announcement that he could be available.

The professor, glancing along the article with moderate interest, reached a paragraph that told of the illustrious man's educational background—a notable Eastern prep school, a renowned university.

The professor's booze-bleary old eyes widened and he took a quick breath—he and this eminence had something in common. He hadn't known Wandworth was an Easterner. But there it was, the name of his own university, and damned if the years didn't coincide. Wandworth had been there in 1957, '58.

The professor frowned at the smiling photo above the article, but he couldn't place the face as that of one of his students, which was not surprising—it was a lot of years ago, a lot of booze.

He read on.

One's impression of Herman Wandworth is that he is a man who, for all his acumen, loves to laugh. His clear blue eyes seem to have a permanent crinkle. Those eyes, something in his voice, and certain mannerisms, bring to mind a particular Hollywood actor.

With some impertinence, perhaps, this reporter asked the

famous attorney if he has ever been told he looks just a little like Paul Newman.

He responded, "I can't remember ever having been told that."

He seemed a little embarrassed, and a touch of red showed in his cheeks. The subject was quickly changed. One sees in him an attractive modesty one all too seldom sees in a handsome man . . .

The professor looked again at the photograph. Round face, pleasant smile. He put his hand over the face, under the eyes, and concentrated on the eyes. If they were clear blue . . . Take away twenty-two years, thin down the cheeks, assume a clean-cut chin and jawline, color the hair light-brown . . . Yes, as a young man he might have borne a resemblance to the actor.

The professor sat still as if, should he move, the thoughts in his head might go tumbling out his ears and scatter around on the bar.

Herman. Not a romantic name. Winnie had been a wayward child—a romantic. To her, Herman would seem heavy, solemn, suggestive of ponderous movements and middle-age. She wouldn't want to call a lover Herman. If she had a lover of that name she might give him a private name, a love-name that would please her, a name that seemed youthful, lively, appropriate for someone with clear blue eyes that crinkled.

Paul might seem a fit name.

And when the gushy reporter's dumb question had poked into that area, Wandworth had seemed "embarrassed, and a touch of red showed in his cheeks. The subject was quickly changed." Yes. Twenty-two years ago—and not a memory to be proud of. Good reason not to look back on that long-ago spring when a beautiful, silly blonde housewife might have gifted him with the love-name Paul.

The professor put down his empty glass, got up, and went on rickety old legs out the door.

He went home to his room a few blocks from Pete's Place. It was over a garage. Inside were his furnishings—a cot, the TV that didn't work, a suitcase. The suitcase was a desk if he wanted to write something—like fill out a welfare form. He knelt and opened it and pawed in among a few old books and law magazines and various junk he'd carried around for the nine years since leaving jail. Pulling out a manila envelope, he went

to the cot and perched there and shook the contents of the envelope out on the bed.

Clippings from newspapers of 1958—articles, photos. A souvenir menu from the wedding dinner. Photos of a few university affairs. An old program from the Brown game in 1957 (why had he kept that?). Photos of Winnie—bouncing short blonde hair, dimples, shining teeth, shining, lying eyes. He looked through everything, feeling nothing in particular; too much time gone by, too much booze the past nine years. He put the stuff back in the envelope, set it on the floor, lay down, and let the ale in his brain carry him gently out on a soft, deep sea.

Time. The sea had no time. P. owed him time. If P. had come forward, the jury would have seen P. there in bed with Winnie. That could have made all the difference—they might have accepted his red rage. Ten years' difference, maybe. Time. But his time was almost spun out. His insides were shot—a few hundred more ales at Pete's, a few more aimless conversations . . . His time was almost gone, and a good thing. But P. owed him—something.

Then again, maybe not. Maybe P. owed him nothing. But P. owed—somebody. Who or what? The law? The spirit of justice? Had his own punishment—thirteen years, or rather a life—had that been justice?

Maybe. The prosecutor *had* been a master of the absurd, but maybe justice works that way sometimes—absurdly. But in the end giving you what you've earned. One way or another, giving you your fair pay.

A stupid remark by a reporter, from which Millby had pulled a thread and stretched it out to become a theory. A frail thread, easily snapped—absurd to try to tie it to Wandworth. But maybe Wandworth was meant to be caught in something absurd, as the professor had been. Maybe that was the way justice would come to him too—absurdly. If he were P.

The famous attorney had the cab drive him past the Post Street entrance around the block. He paid, tipped, gave his wide, warm smile. The driver was of the people, and the attorney would make his run, if he did, as the candidate of the people. A campaign begins with a smile.

He crossed an alley and headed for a discreet, unmarked door near the rear of the building that contained his offices—a door that led directly into his private sanctum.

A bum stood near the door, looking toward him. Shabby jacket,

squashed canvas hat, bloated drinker's face. Bums are everywhere—and some are voters. The attorney, briskly approaching, put a good-natured look on his face.

As he walked past he heard, in a low voice, the name of his university.

Key in the lock, he turned. "What did you say?"

"You knew my wife there. In the biblical sense."

I knew his wife . . . He had known numerous wives through the years. — In the biblical sense. But only one wife had he known in that way at the university.

He looked at the seamed, pouched face, and it was as if the eroded flesh fell away. The nose seemed to thin, the lips tightened, slack folds under the chin and jaw disappeared, and a cold, supercilious face was before him. Instead of the squashed hat he saw thin dark hair; instead of the worn jacket a dark suit, white shirt, precise tie. Millby at his lecture stand. The Worm.

He whispered, "My God!"

And ran.

Inside, he slammed the door, shot the bolt, and stood there shaking. He leaned on the door, thinking back to that night . . .

Flat; polished eyes staring. The lug wrench—up, down, up, down—striking flesh, the flesh of the woman. —What was her name? She screaming. He'd slid from the bed, crouched, weak, trembling, naked—incredibly, not noticed. The murderer smashing down on the flesh before him on the bed—up, down, up, down—spurts of blood from the white body. Himself across the room, shaking, grabbing up his clothes, dropping a shoe. The murderer didn't hear, the murderer and the woman—Winnie, that was her name—locked in a circle that he dared not break into. That terrible curved steel . . . He seized the shoe, and with his bundle lurched out the door and down the stairs to his car, parked in back. Nobody was passing, nobody saw. He got in, drove home to his fraternity house—a nude man driving across campus—parked in the yard behind the house, put on his clothes. Then he sat for a long time until the house was dark and quiet before letting himself in the back door and going up the stairs to his room.

Nobody knew. Some of the guys had suspected he was having a thing with her, but he hadn't bragged—and he wasn't her only lover. And no one knew her love-name for him.

Everyone liked him, admired him—he was good-looking, muscular,

a gymnast, bright and articulate, with a great future—why mention that he might have been involved with her? It would just cause unpleasantness for him. There'd be police with questions, snoop reporters—general messiness. And all for no good, because Millby was lying, that was plain. No one had been in the bedroom with his wife that night. If someone had been, that person wouldn't have run—he'd have fought. As the prosecutor said.

Which was why Wandworth could never speak up. Because everyone admired him, he had a great future—and he had run. Not hurt, not even hit, he had run like a naked rabbit. While the woman, screaming, was being smashed to death.

He came back from that night, and only a few seconds had passed. Knocking came on the door he leaned against—not loud, but steady and insistent.

"You hear me. You know I'm here."

The attorney whispered, "Why are you here?"

"You were her lover. You're P. You were there on campus that spring, and you have clear blue eyes."

"You're a crazy old man. I don't know what you're talking about. I'll call the police."

"All right. There'll be reporters. I'll tell them how it was. How you ran. How afterwards you wouldn't stand up and say you'd been there with her."

"Who would believe you?"

"It doesn't matter. It'll get known. In time it'll get known."

"Absurd—this is all absurd!"

"Yes—absurd. Maybe from it will come justice for you. If you're P."

Why was he sagging here against the door? He must straighten up, get hold of himself! The man outside was nothing, an old bum—Millby the bum—and it had happened twenty-two years ago. Was he afraid he had a lug wrench under his wretched jacket? Was he afraid Millby would attack him through the door? He must straighten up!

—Be a man! Stop lying—you do a bad thing and then lie that you haven't! I hate a sneak who lies! Take your punishment when you're bad! Be a man!

He slid down the door. He lay there, looking up. His father stood over him—thin lips and incredible coldness in his eyes . . . There was his

cane, going up. Whack—the boy screamed, writhed—whack, whack, whack—

—You're a sneak! You're a coward! Take your punishment! Be a man!

They heard it in the outer offices, shot startled looks at each other. A young assistant attorney hurried to the door, calling the famous man's name. He faltered a little at the door. Someone had sneaked in the private street door. Wandworth was being attacked. Secretaries, colleagues were in the hall, their eyes were on him . . . Was this a moment of truth for him? Was he brave inside, really brave? He had a future—was this moment the key to it? Turn the knob and step in, or turn away, wait for help, the police? Does a future hang on a particular second? Was this his? He turned the knob and threw open the door.

He saw Wandworth on the floor. He stood at the door, didn't go any farther. Those watching him perceived that there was no danger to cringe from, but something to see.

They crowded up the corridor to peer through the door. They saw Herman N. Wandworth writhing on the floor, hands imploring, wide eyes staring up and out at them, beyond them, and the famous rich voice now a dull, steady scream—

“Don't—don't—please don't! I'm sorry—don't—don't hurt me—don't hurt me—don't! I didn't mean it—don't—”

The shabby man at the street door stood listening as voices gradually sounded at the edges of Wandworth's screams.

“Get him up.” —“No, leave him, call his doctor.” —“Who's his doctor?” —“It's in his book.” —“Where's his book?” —“How would I know?” —“His doctor's Crankshaw, on Sutter.” —“Why are you laughing?” —“I'm not—am I? It's just—I can't believe it! —look at him! He's a little kid! A little kid, shaking and drooling—”

Steadily the dull screaming went on.

The man at the back door was gone before the ambulance came. He walked slowly south, to Market, and up to Seventh, where he caught the bus back to Lindenvale.

Later word came from the hospital that the noted attorney, Herman N. Wandworth, had been stricken with an acute gastric disturbance. He was resting comfortably, and expected to be back at his office in a few days.

Some days later his doctor reported that Wandworth was suffering from

exhaustion due to overwork and was returning to his family home in the East for a complete rest.

Some months passed. The plan to run him for governor was shelved. His condominium on Russian Hill and his law practice were sold. As time went on, the question was heard less and less—“I wonder what *really* happened to Herman Wandworth?”

Joseph Millby lingers on. He can be found almost any day at Pete's Place, near the tracks in Lindenvale. A blotchy, shabby old man, mild of manner, drinking ale.

Debbie, the day barperson, thinks he looks a lot better than he used to—“much more relaxed, like things are pretty much taken care of and he can take it easy, read the papers, chat a little, drink his ale.”

She could be right. Absurd as it seems, he may know that justice has been done—and that the Millby case is closed.



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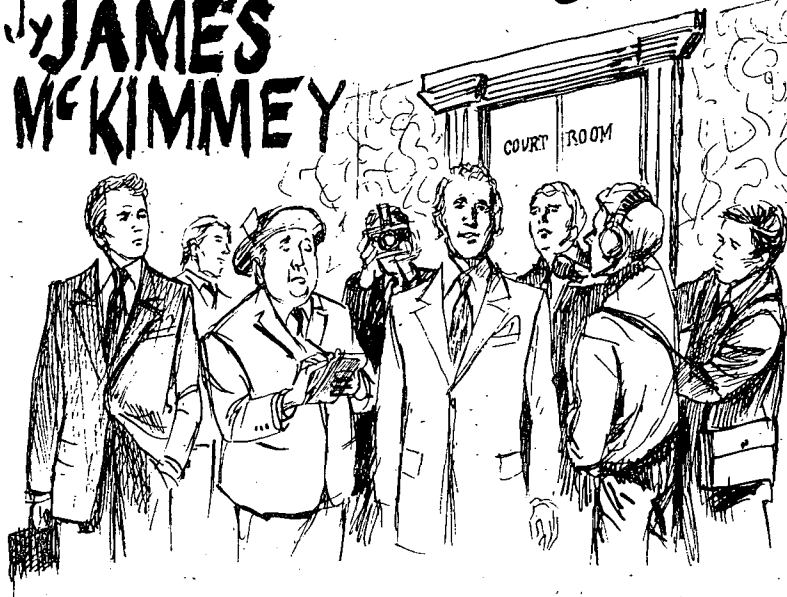
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The ambitious young prosecutor smelled blood . . .

THE LIE DETECTOR

by JAMES
McKIMMEY



I had seemed to be living elatedly somewhere in outer space after I'd graduated from law school the previous summer, passed the California bar examination, and been lucky enough to become an assistant to F. Berton Blackmore, the renowned attorney. But ever since the murder of movie director Peter Hurley and the arrest of his beautiful young sixth wife for the crime, I'd been gradually coming back down to earth.

Now, seated in a courtroom in the Sierra Nevada Mountains, I realized

that I was at last solidly reunited with terra firma. The trial was not yet over, but I knew quite certainly that F. Berton Blackmore would lose the contest if it continued the way it had been going. And reporters, photographers, and television cameras were waiting to announce the event to the world.

For years I'd viewed Blackmore as an absolute hero, despite his irascibility. I'd envied him his fame, his wealth, and the beautiful women in his life. I'd imagined him to be virtually invulnerable in a courtroom.

It was true that he was now cast in a different role from his usual one. Normally he defended clients in malpractice suits and this was, at fifty-eight, his first murder trial. Yet it was totally surprising to me that his effort to win it for his client was sliding rapidly downhill without ever having gotten started.

The ambitious young prosecutor, smelling blood, stood questioning the last of several witnesses he'd called, including a few who had only the remotest association with the murder. The judge, a lugubrious-looking middle-aged man, appeared to be half dozing.

And the gorgeous auburn-haired Celeste Hurley who was on trial for murder had the look of a fragile flower brutalized by an unexpected rainstorm.

The jury, in spite of wide differences in age, sex, experience, and intelligence, displayed one facial expression that said: Our minds are made up. End these foolish formalities so we can declare this cheap little bit-part actress guilty and go home.

F. Berton Blackmore sat beside me in mournful silence, wearing one of his expensive suits. His thick, silvery hair appeared casually arranged though obviously styled by San Francisco's best hairdresser. His round face with its thick rosebud lips had sagged into the look of a defeated hound dog.

It was as though I had suddenly realized, despite all evidence to the contrary, that the sun rose in the west.

But facts were facts, and the facts were these:

Peter Hurley had finished his last picture, which had been shot in Micronesia, and returned to the States to join Celeste, his wife of seven months. They had come to his spectacular vacation home on the south shore of Lake Tahoe. Two hours after their arrival, Hurley had been shot dead by a weapon yet to be found.

The shots had been heard by a carpenter working on a new house

nearby. The carpenter had summoned the police. Hurley's young wife, the most obvious suspect since no one else had been found in or near the house, had been arrested.

Mrs. Hurley had then telephoned Blackmore. Peter Hurley and Blackmore had been close friends for a long time. Blackmore had taken the case—surely out of compassion rather than his usual astuteness, I now thought. (I had driven Blackmore in his limousine from San Francisco to Tahoe—acting as his chauffeur was part of my job, despite my legal education.)

Celeste Hurley had denied murdering her husband. She claimed that the carpenter, a handsome, muscular twenty-three-year-old named Fred Apple, had appeared abruptly in the living room shortly after their arrival and shot Hurley several times.

Our investigation had turned up no evidence of any relationship between the victim and the carpenter. Fred Apple had insisted upon his innocence. There appeared to be no motive for Apple to kill Hurley.

Moreover, Apple had volunteered to take a lie-detector test by stipulation, meaning that the result could be used in court. And the test indicated that Apple was telling the truth when he said he hadn't murdered Peter Hurley.

Celeste Hurley had also been willing to take the test on the same basis, but Blackmore had advised her against it—I supposed because of some reservation about the absolute reliability of lie detectors.

But after the prosecutor, in his opening statement, had established the widow's probable motive for killing her husband—while filming in Micronesia, Peter Hurley had carried on a blazing affair with the movie's female star—I was no longer certain about Blackmore's directions. Three prosecution witnesses who had worked with Hurley on location had sworn to the effect that he had been cheating on his current wife.

Although that rumor had never been mentioned to me prior to the trial, I was certain Celeste had known about it. Knowing glints of anger had appeared in her eyes during the testimony of those three witnesses. Consequently, I'd decided that F. Berton Blackmore, with his skill in extracting pertinent facts from his clients, had known as well. And I began to wonder if Blackmore had advised the lady against the lie-detector test because he thought she might actually be guilty. Even so, he might have taken the case certain that a small-town prosecutor would be no match for him. But the prosecutor had proven more than capable. And the tide

was now running strongly against our client. I knew that the jury was going to declare Celeste Hurley guilty as charged if the tide didn't change, and quickly.

The prosecutor finished interrogating his last witness and Blackmore was given the opportunity to cross-examine. He declined, and the judge adjourned proceedings until ten the next morning.

I was driving Blackmore toward the hotel where he had taken a suite and I had a small room on a lower floor. I could see his face in the rearview mirror: grim, petulant, hurt, angered, resentful.

"What can I say, Mr. Blackmore?" I offered finally.

"What can I say?" he mimicked, his voice charged with sarcasm. "If you had deliberately set out to find one singular phrase calculated to annoy me, Mr. Cheves, you could not have been more successful!" He had addressed me as Mr. Cheves from the beginning of our relationship, never as Sidney. But I'd always known that genius did not necessarily breed likability, and in spite of the difficulty of maintaining a civil, if not warm, personal relationship I hadn't lost my awe of him.

For years I'd dreamed of one day achieving a similar position in my life and career. I'd studied hard and tried to emulate him, purchasing a flamboyant wardrobe to the best of my buying power and investing myself in amateur theatrical productions in the hope of learning his dramatic flair.

Now I realized that instead of being concerned that the woman charged with the murder of her husband was well on her way to prison, I was regretting the fact that Blackmore was on the brink of losing his first case since he had achieved his reputation.

I dined alone in the hotel coffee shop, trying to think of some logical avenue that might lead us away from the path matters were now taking.

By dinner's end I had made up my mind.

But the next morning I was feeling a new pride and a refreshing excitement as I drove Blackmore to court. I had handed him a sheaf of papers, saying, "Please read these, sir. I did some investigating last night. These are the results as well as my ideas on how to proceed."

He didn't give any reaction until I'd parked beside the Hall of Justice and he got out of the car and faced me squarely in the bright sunlight.

"I have always had misgivings about you, Mr. Cheves," he said, "but

one of them was not that you suffered from the delusion you are Sherlock Holmes. What have you been ingesting, sir, to have acquired such a preposterous idea?"

He stuffed my papers into his briefcase, turned, and pushed brusquely past the reporters to go inside.

Yet minutes after the trial resumed he was on his feet, requesting that the carpenter, Fred Apple, be recalled to the witness stand.

Apple, who had been detained in an outer room, came striding into court with the brisk authority of a man who was entirely sure of himself. He went to the witness box, sat down, and looked around with an engaging smile. He wore jeans and a neatly pressed blue workshirt.

I was at the defense table beside Celeste Hurley when Blackmore moved across the courtroom to Apple. She asked me in a timorous voice, "What's he doing?"

I shook my head, but I could feel my pulse beating more quickly. He'd read my papers after all.

"Mr. Apple," my employer intoned grandly, "you have testified previously that your complete and sole knowledge of the details of Peter Hurley's murder was that you heard shots fired in the house where he died—and nothing more."

"You got that one right," Apple agreed in his rather slight voice with the Texas drawl.

Blackmore began pacing majestically. Then he said, his voice reaching to the farthest corners of the courtroom, "You are not at all what you seem to be—are you, Mr. Apple?"

The members of the jury became more alert. The judge seemed to wake up. The bailiff sat erect. The prosecutor frowned.

Apple grinned genially. "Well, if I ain't what I seem to be, then I don't know as to what I am! But what I think I am is a poor little ol' boy from Weatherford, Texas."

"*Really.*" That one word seemed to carry more portent than the thousands of words that had flowed in this room since the trial began. Blackmore was indeed a superb performer, which was probably why he and the late Peter Hurley had been such great friends. In many ways, they had really been in the same business.

"I've received reports on you, Mr. Apple," Blackmore went on. "It's hardly a secret that you've been frequenting Mary's Café and Tavern since you arrived here in late spring."

Apple shrugged. "I like Mary. Like her place. It's a lot like home."
"Home?" Mr. Blackmore said. His eyes rolled upward. He took a deep breath. "Home?"

"Weatherford, Texas. Sure enough."

Mr. Blackmore seemed to be smiling at some secret joke. "Do they serve the beer warm down in Weatherford, Mr. Apple?"

"It sure gets hot enough sometimes that it warms the beer, all right."

"And you *like* your beer warm, don't you, Mr. Apple? Not refrigerated. That's why Mary keeps a warm supply especially for you. Isn't that true, Mr. Apple?"

"Too-cold beer always kind of froze my taste buds," Apple said, his voice becoming stronger and more penetrating.

"But you do occasionally drink something besides beer?"

"I like something with more jolt in her now and again."

"Such as a gin and tonic?"

"Your Honor," the prosecutor said, standing, "this is going nowhere. There's no relevance."

The judge held up his hand. "Proceed, Mr. Blackmore."

"Thank you, Your Honor." He continued to examine Apple. "You also prefer your gin and tonic without ice, do you not?"

"Like I said," Apple replied, "too cold always kind of—"

"Freezes your taste buds," Blackmore finished. "You often eat at Mary's as well as drink there, don't you, Mr. Apple?"

"Sure do."

"What do you like to eat when you're at Mary's, Mr. Apple?"

"Well, them good old American hamburgers she serves are mighty tasty."

"Anything else?"

"Can't beat Mary's steaks! Big, juicy, good old American steaks you can cut with a fork."

"And what do you like to go along with these good old American hamburgers and good old American steaks, Mr. Apple?"

Apple's smile widened. "Big gang of them good old American chips."

"Ah, yes," Blackmore said. "Do you mean potato chips, Mr. Apple? Or would you possibly mean French-fried potatoes?"

"French fries is what I mean. I love taters done that way."

Blackmore began pacing again. Now every jury member was watching him with great concentration. I was feeling tremendous satisfaction. I'd

found out about Mary and her place from other guests at Apple's rooming house, and I'd interviewed her at length. She'd responded easily and with eagerness. Mary was a real talker.

"What else do you do besides carpentry, Mr. Apple?" asked my employer.

"Ain't got a particle of talent for any other-thing," he said.

A furtive smile again shaped Blackmore's rosebud lips. He started to speak again, then hesitated. He paced out a small circle, then finally asked, "When Mary was about to take a journey to San Francisco a few weeks ago, did you tell her to bust an ankle?" (Mary had told me she'd thought it surprisingly crude of a man so otherwise pleasant.)

Apple's eyes narrowed. "I don't know as I said any such."

Again the prosecutor got to his feet. "There's no sense to any of this, Your Honor! What is my colleague trying to prove?"

"I'll tell you what I'm trying to prove," Blackmore responded. "And that is that this man is not what he claims to be!"

"I'm just a carpenter from Weatherford, Texas," Apple drawled in protest. "And I got the papers to prove it!"

"Oh, yes, I'm sure you do," Blackmore said dryly. "And you *have* obviously learned carpentry well enough to gain employment. You have also been speaking with a good enough Texas drawl to convince most people. But you've also betrayed little giveaways along the way. You like your beer warm, your gin and tonic without ice. You refer to French-fried potatoes as chips. You're really an Englishman, aren't you, Mr. Apple? Or whatever your real name is?"

"Objection!" shouted the prosecutor.

"Overruled," said the judge.

"I'm just a good old boy from—"

"Then," Blackmore interrupted, "you told Mary to bust an ankle prior to her taking a trip—no doubt an intended similitude for the phrase 'break a leg.' Meaning, of course, in the theatrical world, 'good luck.' You've used other show business phrases and words according to Mary—run of the play, poor study, props, and so forth. You're really an actor, aren't you, Mr. Apple? A very good actor? Your portrayal—especially in view of the fact that you are actually English—of a poor old boy from Weatherford, Texas, is a *tour de force*. And because you *are* such a superlative actor, it's my belief that you were able to fool the lie detector. Isn't that true?"

"Objection! Objection!" called the prosecutor.

Blackmore had led the man to the gate and now he was going to lead him through, just as my script had indicated.

Blackmore moved toward the witness until he was squarely in front of Apple. They gazed at each other unwaveringly, then Blackmore said, "I imagine that when you took the lie-detector test, you securely imagined yourself to be another person—an innocent party. As a consequence, your blood pressure, pulse, respiration, and skin response—all measures recorded by the polygraph machine—responded as those of someone who was innocent of the crime. You are formidable, sir, to have done that. Now why not admit not only that you're British, but that you are one of the finest actors alive?"

My words, just as I'd typed them out late the night before—designed to exploit Apple's ego!

"And then," Blackmore said to the witness, "tell us why you—and not my client—murdered Peter Hurley!"

"I object!" the prosecutor protested.

"Will you sit down, Harry?" the judge told him.

"Please answer the question, Mr. Apple," Blackmore said.

"Not Apple," the man said. "Grimstone—Robin Grimstone, from London, England. 'E 'ad it comin', gov'nor. I shot 'im through the 'ead."

There was a gasp from the jurors and spectators. I felt light-headed with triumph.

Grimstone then admitted that he was indeed one of the finest actors alive—if not the best. Adding that if Peter Hurley had not turned him down for a part in his latest motion picture, the entire world would know it by now.

But Hurley, stupidly, hadn't given him that chance. So Grimstone had worked out a plan to murder Hurley and had carried it out, strengthening his plea of innocence by asking for the lie-detector test. Yes, he'd killed Peter Hurley, he stated without regret. He even told Blackmore where he'd hidden the murder weapon. It mattered not that he would go to prison, he said—he'd been there before, and no walls could hold him. He would escape again, and reappear in other faces, using other accents, to prove—finally and universally—his true greatness as a thespian.

At the end of his confession, the judge ordered the bailiff to take Grimstone into custody, then asked the lawyers to meet him in his cham-

bers. When that meeting had ended it was mutually agreed that the trial should be terminated. Celeste Hurley was free, and Robin Grimstone was jailed to await trial.

Blackmore and I were walking toward the doors, outside of which reporters, photographers, and television cameras were waiting. "We did it, didn't we, Mr. Blackmore?" I said with enthusiasm.

"We?" he asked.

"You and I—yes," I said, startled.

"I rather think it was my show, was it not?"

"But I did the investigation."

"Certainly. You're my assistant."

"On my own, I mean! I thought up the way to handle it—it was all in the papers I gave you."

"What papers?" he asked archly, carrying the briefcase that contained them. He adjusted his tie and moved a hand through his hair to make sure it appeared casually rumpled. "You're deliberately trying to annoy me again, aren't you, Mr. Cheves? I should try to avoid that in the future if I were you, or I think I shall have to let you go."

Then we were outside facing a lightning storm of electronic flashes. As reporters and television cameras moved in on him I stepped to the edge of the crowd and listened in grim silence as F. Berton Blackmore responded to questions from the press. He never mentioned my name.

The limousine moved swiftly down the mountain on the return trip to San Francisco. The chauffeur I'd hired, white-haired with a neat white moustache and goatee, drove. I sat on his right with my left wrist heavily bandaged. Blackmore was in back as usual, with Celeste Hurley beside him. Once again she looked quite stunning.

I was beginning to understand more and more about F. Berton Blackmore. He had admitted to me that he hadn't represented Celeste for reasons of compassion, or even for the money. The reason he'd taken on what had seemed to be such a risky gamble was simply an interest in acquiring one of Peter Hurley's beautiful women—although now that he had her, he already seemed bored with the acquisition.

"I think," he said angrily to me, "that you displayed an extreme degree of foolishness by visiting Grimstone in his jail cell! Why did you?"

"I told you, sir, I wanted to congratulate him on his talent as an actor."

"But he's a murderer."

"Of course he is—but he's still a marvelous actor."

"And now he's escaped! How could he *possibly* have acquired the gun that enabled him to walk out of that jail and disappear?"

"I certainly didn't give it to him, sir!"

"Your attempt at humor is abominably shallow, Mr. Cheves!"

The police had, of course, questioned me about that. But why would the assistant of the attorney who had deduced the fact that Robin Grimstone was the real murderer of Peter Hurley wish to smuggle a small pistol—the kind one might carry while traveling—into Grimstone's cell and so allow him to escape?

"Then falling down in your room and breaking your wrist!" Blackmore said accusingly. "Clumsy, as well as foolish!"

"My feet simply went out from under me," I said. I looked at the bandaged wrist. It did look professionally done.

"So now I'm required to have a new driver!" Blackmore said petulantly. "Are you certain this man is qualified?"

The driver looked hurt and drove on as Blackmore continued to grumble. "It ruined everything, his escape—made it seem that my apprehending him was useless. Why didn't they search him properly? Small towns! I've always hated them."

I was feeling better now than I had since the trial ended.

"Bugs," said the driver, pointing to where an insect had just smashed into the glass in front of us. "Gettin' all over da windscreen."

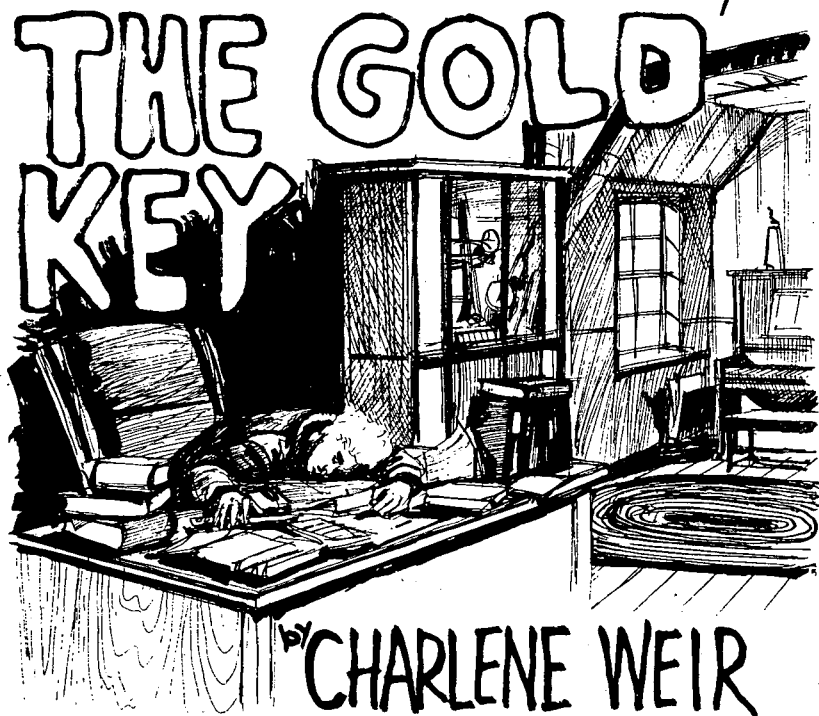
"What did he say?" Blackmore said angrily from the back seat.

"He said bugs are getting all over the *windshield*!" I replied, looking back and smiling. The girl smiled at Blackmore and moved closer to him.

I leaned back and relaxed. I might not enjoy it, but I could use several more months as F. Berton Blackmore's assistant in order to study his courtroom manners at greater length. I had the intelligence and inventiveness—all I needed was the style. And, with the help of another expert drama coach, I was going to get it. Success would ensue, and beautiful women would follow.

Contentedly, I turned my attention to the driver, hoping that he'd have the sense to keep quiet when not required to speak and that the bloke wasn't absent-minded enough to suddenly start driving down the left side of the road instead of the right.

The professor had intended to change his will . . .



From the doorway Lieutenant Harry van Hoorn stared impassively at the dead man. This would mess up his evening with Jenny. Waiflike Jenny with her odd clothing and bare feet that he vaguely disapproved of. She was like seeing a rainbow for the first time.

Professor Carson Blakely had been shot in the chest. The body was seated in a padded leather desk chair, sprawled forward, his head on the desk, his bushy white hair in disarray, both hands on the desk. His left

hand was clenched but death had loosened the muscle tension and Harry could see a small glint of gold under the curl of the fingers. The right hand lay flat, palm down, over a letter opener—a silver dagger with red stones in the handle.

Blood, sticky and clotted, had oozed beyond the professor's torso, fouling his papers and staining the ends of his white hair. The sickly odor had attracted the agitated attention of large green flies.

Sergeant Dietrich gave a low whistle as he fitted a flashbulb into his camera. "Hell to pay," he said.

"You couldn't have said it better," Harry muttered. Carson Blakely had been a professor of English literature at Emmerson College. A vigorous, dynamic man, sixty years old, he was a renowned scholar with a dozen or more erudite books to his credit.

He had a passionate interest in folk songs and old ballads. A great part of his summers were spent combing the mountains and the back country with a tape recorder, coaxing people to sing songs that had been handed down to them over the generations. He'd spent months researching, tracing the songs back over the centuries.

While the photographer and fingerprint men were busy, Harry waited in the doorway, his arms folded across his broad chest, his dark eyes methodically taking in every inch of the room, the main living area of the four-room cabin.

Rough-hewn beamed ceilings, stone fireplace, heavy wood-framed couch and chairs with black-leather cushions, braided rugs on the floor. An old upright piano stood in the corner next to the only window. By the far side of the window were a row of cases containing musical instruments. Two walls of shelves were crammed solid with books. The desk was oak, old and outsized, its top piled with books, diaries, notebooks, papers, and tattered stacks of sheet music. There were two bedrooms off one end of the main room and a kitchen off the other, with an outhouse in the back. The cabin was twelve miles from town in a hilly, wooded area about half a mile from the lake.

Harry's eyes went back to the sheet music and he thought again of Jenny, who sang folk songs in a pure, haunting voice at a local coffee house. He'd miss her tonight, but Blakely's murder took precedence over everything—even Jenny.

"We're done, Lieutenant," Dietrich said, removing the film from his camera. "Unless there's something else you want."

"Did you get a shot of that dagger? And a clear shot of the left hand? Whatever he's got in that hand?"

"Yes, Lieutenant," Dietrich said patiently. "What do you think it is?"

Harry shrugged, refusing to guess but impatient to know.

"We'll take this stuff in then," Dietrich said.

Harry nodded. "Is the coroner here yet?"

"He's outside."

"Send him in."

Dietrich and the fingerprint men packed up their equipment and went out.

Del Santini stood aside to let them pass, then entered the room and strode to the desk. He stood, hands clasped behind his back, his thin lips pulled into a tight inverted V, looking down at the corpse. The coroner was a tall, cadaverous man with a bald head, pale amber eyes set deep under a bony forehead. His face was lined and his skin was grey. He didn't look a great deal more healthy than most of the corpses he dealt with.

He swiveled and regarded Harry with a funereal frown. "Charley isn't going to like this."

He wasn't the only one, Harry thought—although Harry seldom thought of Charles Pennington, the college president, as Charley. "Get on with it. I want to know what's in his left hand."

"Don't be in such a hurry. All in good time." With a gentleness past being necessary, Del's sensitive hands went to work. "Are you expecting a dying message? A cryptic clue to the identity of the killer?"

Harry grunted and crossed the room to look out the window. Spring had come early this year. Already the trees were thick with new leaves. The grass in the small cleared area around the cabin had gotten a good start poking up shoots of fresh green. His eyes followed the gravel path down the slope to the lake, placid and shiny blue in the sun. If he didn't solve this one quickly—and immediately would be better—he'd receive a lot of pressure.

"He's been shot," Del said.

"I know *that*," Harry told him sourly, turning from the window. "I was hoping for a little bit more. How long ago?"

"Good God, man, let me finish my job! My guess is several hours—I should know more after the autopsy." Bending his long body at a right angle, he peered at the dagger. "O.K. if I handle this?"

"Go ahead," Harry said and Del slid the dagger from under the dead hand. He held it up, turned it in his hands, and rubbed a thumb across the red stones. "Pretty." He handed it to Harry.

Harry took it to the window and examined it. Jenny had a song about a silver dagger, a sad, forlorn song. He must call her and explain why he couldn't keep their date tonight. Enchanting Jenny, with a smile that would inflame poets, she had picked the locks, plucked the chains, and opened the barred doors he had carefully constructed around his middle-aged, middle-class soul.

"Is this thing real?" Harry asked.

"I don't know what you mean by real. If you mean valuable, without a doubt. I expect the gems are rubies. If you mean authentic, that's not my field, but I'd say probably. It could be a relic from the fourteenth century. Carson never liked anything fake. Do you think he tried to defend himself with it?"

"No," Harry said. "What's there in his hand?"

Del uncurled the fingers of the left hand. "House key—gold. And I don't mean just the color."

He turned it over and gave a snort of laughter. "By God, there's your dying message!"

Harry grabbed the key. The letter A had been scratched on the rounded end.

"Pretty cryptic," Del said. "What do you make of it?"

Harry gave a sound of disgust. "Did he die immediately?"

"I'd say probably not."

"How long?"

Del scowled. "Can't you wait for the autopsy?"

"Guess."

"Outer limit, maybe twenty minutes. But it's strictly a guess until I can examine—"

"So he might have had time to scratch this letter on the key before he died?"

"Maybe," Del said with heavy reluctance. "But why would he do that when he was surrounded by paper and pens?"

"He might have wanted to leave something not too obvious. In case the killer came back. Gold is soft—it wouldn't have been too difficult."

Del looked skeptical. "It's too bad he didn't have a phone out here. He could have called somebody."

"Would he have lived? If he'd gotten help?"

"I doubt it. But I told you I won't know anything definite until—"

"Right. Take him away and do your autopsy. I'd appreciate it if you didn't waste any time."

"I understand," Del said.

Back in his office, Harry van Hoorn sent for coffee and while he waited he studied Dr. Koehler. Allen Bradshaw Koehler. Harry printed out the full name and circled the A in Allen.

Koehler, a professor of history and an old crony of Blakely, was a fussy little man. His plump hands clutched a red bandanna and periodically he patted his round face with it. His appearance and manner seemed totally incongruous with his blue jeans, the cuffs turned up, and red plaid shirt. When the coffee arrived he accepted a cup thankfully and took a hasty sip.

"I'm sorry you had to wait so long," Harry said. "I thought you'd rather wait here than out at the cabin."

"Indeed, Lieutenant. Most considerate of you. This is a dreadful shock. Dreadful. We were friends for a great number of years."

Koehler did seem to be in shock, but he was managing to pull himself together and the coffee seemed to help.

"You found the body a little after ten?" Harry asked.

Koehler bobbed his head. "I estimate it would have been about that time when I got there. I must confess my mind went blank when I saw him. But when I fully realized the situation I did move with alacrity, Lieutenant." He gazed sheepishly at Harry. "Of course, I had to come almost all the way back to town to find a telephone. I'm afraid I didn't think of looking at my watch until then. I told him many times he should have a telephone put in. Many times."

"Why didn't he?"

"He wouldn't consider it. He wanted to be inaccessible."

"Why no bathroom?"

"He didn't want to make the place attractive for—well, for his wife. Margot is his second wife, you know. His first wife died thirteen—no, I believe it was fourteen years ago."

"He'd invited you out for a weekend of fishing?"

Koehler patted his forehead with the bandanna. "Well, yes, partly. But the main reason was scholarships."

"Did he handle scholarship funds for the school? Pass approval on applicants?"

"No, no, you misunderstand me. Carson had a considerable amount of money, you know. He wanted to set up a fund to provide scholarships for worthy—uh, talented—students of music. Not that I know anything about trust funds or the like, but he wanted to talk it over with me. He was determined to change his will, get it all set in motion by Monday. I assume it would require some amount of time. I've never had large sums of money, but it doesn't seem the sort of thing that can be completed satisfactorily in a short time."

"He meant to change his will?"

"Oh, yes, yes. I didn't think that was right. His family—his wife and daughter—had been led to expect— And to cut them off without a cent— Oh, dear, dear, what a melodramatic cliché." Koehler shook his head sorrowfully.

"Was this something he decided recently," Harry asked, "or had he been thinking about it for some time?"

"I don't know, actually. The first I heard of it was on Friday evening when he telephoned and asked me to go out to the cabin with him. I had some work I wanted to complete that evening but I told him I would go out on Saturday morning."

Harry finished his coffee, crushed the styrofoam cup, tossed it at the wastepaper basket, and missed. "Why did Blakely want to change his will, do you know?"

"Oh, dear." Koehler studied the bandanna as though fascinated by the pattern. "Carson had dinner with his family last night, I think you know. I suspect there might have been a row." He looked unhappily at Harry.

"What about?"

Koehler sighed. "Carson's second marriage hadn't worked out the way he'd hoped," Koehler said, "and Mae, his daughter, had married a man he disliked intensely. He has always pressured her to get a divorce. They quarrelled often." He shifted uncomfortably and peered into his empty cup. "I don't feel as though I should be telling you all this."

"Don't worry about it," Harry said and gave him his statement to sign. As Dr. Koehler was reading through it before signing, Harry printed out three more names: Margot Rose Blakely, wife; Mae Amanda Graham, daughter; Frank Claybern Graham, son-in-law. He looked at the names, then carefully circled the A in Amanada.

The Blakely home was large, white, and three-storied, built along the lines of a southern mansion, with tall columns across the front. A circular drive lined with stately maple trees led up to the door. Inside, evidence of Professor Blakely's wealth was everywhere, from the silver-blue carpeting and draperies and pale-blue upholstered furniture to the paintings on the walls. Late-afternoon sunshine slanted through the tall arched windows.

Margot Blakely was about thirty, a slender woman just under medium height. She wore a dress of white silk with a gold thread in an intricate design that caught the light when she moved. Her black hair fell in a soft smooth curve to her chin, framing a face of pale, exquisite beauty. Her eyes were a deep vivid blue.

"Mae will be down in a moment, Lieutenant," she said, sitting across from Harry, the sunlight at her back. "Have you any idea who killed my husband?"

"Not yet, Mrs. Blakely." Harry handed her the gold key and asked if she recognized it.

"Of course I do. It's Carson's. I gave it to him on our wedding anniversary."

"If you'll turn it over you'll see there's a letter scratched on it."

She turned it and for an instant there was a frightened, wary look in her eyes. "The letter A? Is it supposed to mean something?"

"Your husband had the key in his hand when he died. Does it mean anything to *you*?"

"Some sort of clue, you mean?"

She leaned forward to return the key to him and her fingertips brushed almost imperceptibly across his palm.

He looked at her face. In a house filled with authentic objects of great beauty, hers was a fake. In manner and smile and gesture she called attention to her breathtaking beauty, but occasionally there was a flinty, calculating spark in the blue eyes and not once did she give any indication she was sorry her husband was dead.

"I'm afraid it doesn't mean a thing to me, Lieutenant. Except the obvious."

"Which is?"

She sighed softly.

"Amanda, of course. Don't tell me that hasn't occurred to you, Lieutenant."

"I understand there was an argument here last night at dinner."

"How on earth did you hear about that?"

"Who was here?"

"Only the family—Carson and myself, Mae and Frank."

"That's all? No servants? No one else?"

"No one else, Lieutenant."

"What was the argument about?"

She sighed. "I really don't know if—"

Harry waited, knowing she wanted him to coax her. When he didn't, she took a sharp breath. "I'm afraid the quarrel was between my husband and Mae."

"What about?"

"Mae wanted Carson to give her some money. He refused, and not exactly gently."

"Why did Mrs. Graham want the money?"

"To give to her husband—so he wouldn't leave her."

"A gift? A kind of bribe?"

"No, Lieutenant, nothing so crude as that. Frank has a chance of buying into a restaurant. Now, of course, Frank will get his money and Mae will get to keep Frank."

"What did you do last night after Dr. Blakely left for his cabin?"

She raised her elegant eyebrows, pretending astonishment that he would ask her for an alibi. "I went to bed and tried to watch television. But I was too restless. The argument had been so upsetting. I dressed again and went out for a drink."

"Where?"

"The Last Unicorn."

The student hangout—Jenny's place. Last night, Friday, the place would have been packed. If Margo *had* gone there it might be almost impossible to prove.

"I wasn't feeling very sociable," she said. "I kept to myself—" She broke off as Mae came down the wide staircase, clinging to her husband's arm. She looked less like a woman who had just lost her father than a besotted bride on her honeymoon.

She was only a year or two younger than her stepmother. Her dark-blonde hair was scraped into a knot at the back of her neck. She wore flat-heeled shoes—in order to diminish her height perhaps—and her blouse had come partially untucked. Her face was strong, her chin firm.

She was in no way pretty but she could have been handsome.

"Mae, dear—Frank," Margot said with sweet concern, "this is Lieutenant van Hoorn."

"You wanted to see us, Lieutenant?" Mae said.

"Didn't your father call you Amanda?"

"Never." She looked puzzled and sat on the sofa, drawing her husband down beside her.

"Well, Mae, that isn't quite true, is it?" Margot said. "He always called you Amanda before you insisted on being called Mae."

"He never did," Mae said, ignoring her stepmother and addressing Harry. "He used to call me Mandy." Her hazel eyes teared up. "That was a long time ago—when we were close."

"Tell me about the argument you had with your father last night."

Mae gasped and looked angrily at her stepmother. "Who told you? Who said we had an argument?"

"I'm sorry, dear," Margot said. "But he already knew."

"I'll just bet you're sorry," Mae said with bitter scorn. She turned back to Harry. "She didn't tell you about the part that concerned her, did she, Lieutenant? About my father telling her he knew how she sneaked around behind his back, going to sleazy motels. He told her exactly what he thought of her and that he was going to get rid of her."

Margot jumped to her feet. "None of that is true! How can you sit there and say such a thing!"

"Oh, you think nobody can prove it. You think you've been so careful."

"I will not stay here and listen to lies," Margot said and swept out of the room and up the stairs. Harry followed her with his eyes, wondering if the A could mean adultery. A variation on Hawthorne's scarlet letter—

"Maisie," Frank was murmuring, "take it *easy*, baby." He was a polished young man with slick dark hair and liquid brown eyes, a straight nose, and perfectly even white teeth. His denim pants were superbly tailored and a gold medallion around his neck rested against a thatch of black hair. He slipped his arm around his wife's shoulders.

"I'm sorry, Lieutenant," she said in a tight voice. "That wasn't like me."

"After dinner last night," Harry said, "what did you do?"

"After my father left, I was so angry I—I got into my car and took a drive."

"Where?"

"I don't know, I don't remember. I just drove for hours. I didn't get back until sometime this morning. I hadn't even gone to bed yet when I heard—when I found out—" Tears filled her eyes and spilled down her face. She fumbled in the pocket of her skirt and Frank handed her his handkerchief.

"Maisie," he said tenderly.

There was nothing ladylike about her crying. Finally she struggled to her feet and blundered blindly toward the stairs. She clung heavily to the banister as she went up.

"Well, Lieutenant," Frank said. "You're stuck with me."

Harry wasn't stuck with him—Mae was. Was it possible she had murdered her father to hold onto this man?

"Are you happily married, Mr. Graham?" Harry said.

Frank raised an eyebrow.

"Weren't you planning to leave your wife unless she managed to procure some money you wanted?"

Frank shook his head, smiling. "No, Lieutenant—I've never thought of leaving my wife."

"Now that Carson Blakely is dead your wife will inherit a great deal of money."

"That's right."

Harry looked at him. Frank looked back, blankly polite. "Any other questions?"

"Where were *you* last night?"

"Right here, Lieutenant. I had a drink, read for a time, and went to bed early." His twisted smile challenged Harry to prove otherwise.

At eight that evening Harry was still at his desk, reading reports from his men. The phone rang and he absently picked up the receiver. "Van Hoorn."

"Hello, van Hoorn, this is Jenny. Haven't you forgotten something?"

"Jenny!" He sat up and rubbed a hand wearily over his eyes. "Jenny, I'm sorry—I meant to call you and I forgot!"

"It's not too late. How soon can you get here?"

"I think I'd better call it off. I've got—"

"Don't you dare! I've spent all day sawing coconuts in half and stuffing them with chicken and other good things. You *have* to eat—how soon can you get here?"

He grinned. "I'm leaving right now."

He heard her lovely pure singing voice and the plaintive sounds of her guitar through the door. He knocked. It was silent. Then he heard her footsteps approaching and she opened the door.

"Harry," she said and melted into his arms. He kissed her long and tenderly. When she pulled back, she looked up at him sternly. "I suppose you need a drink."

"I could use one."

"I'll fix it. Sit down and relax. There's just time for one before dinner. Doesn't it smell good?"

He took in a deep breath. "Great—like sun-ripened fish."

She stood on tiptoe to kiss his cheek. "Remember what I told you. New experiences. Keep an open mind. If I don't watch you, Harry van Hoorn, you'll turn into a stuffy middle-aged man."

"I *am* a stuffy middle-aged man." He reached for her but she slipped away to the kitchen. He stepped carefully across the untidy living room, moved the guitar to one end of the couch, and sat down.

She returned with bourbon and water for him and orange juice for herself. She handed him his drink and sat next to him, tucking her feet up under her.

"Can you tell me about the murder?" she asked.

"No reason why not," he said. "I know you—it won't go any further."

When he had described his day, she sighed. "You think one of those four people killed him?"

Harry nodded. "So far as we've been able to determine, only they knew he'd be at the cabin. Nobody's been able to find any motive for Dr. Koehler, but the other three all had the same good motive: money." He took the key from his pocket and handed it to her. "Unless I'm out of my mind, I think Blakely tried to leave a clue to the identity of his killer."

She took the key. "Is it gold?"

Harry nodded. "Can you think of anything it could mean? The golden A? I even went through the A section of the dictionary and encyclopedia but didn't have any flash of insight. It *could* indicate his old friend Allen Koehler, his daughter Amanda, or maybe an accusation of adultery regarding his wife. She gave him the key."

She traced the letter with one finger, then handed back the key and

picked up her guitar. The chords spoke softly, lingeringly, rippling together. "I know who killed him," she said dreamily.

Harry stared at her. "What are you talking about?" he demanded.

"The key."

"What about it?"

"The letter A by itself means nothing. Listen." She strummed the guitar. "I'm playing in the key of A."

He looked at her blankly.

"The key of A," she repeated, still strumming softly. "It has three sharps. F—" She strummed a chord. "C—" Another chord. "And G—" She looked at him. "Dr. Blakely was telling us his killer was Frank Claybern Graham."

The following Saturday morning Harry called Jenny.

"It gives me great pleasure," he said, "to tell you that the murder of Professor Blakely has been solved, thanks to you. Frank Graham has confessed. In view of my swift and competent handling of the case, President Pennington has invited me to a dinner party this evening. It would give me even greater pleasure if you would accompany me."

"I'd be honored," Jenny said.

"Good. Oh—and, Jenny, as a personal favor to me would you wear—an ordinary dress, a dress like any other beautiful young lady might wear? And—uh—shoes? For me?"

"Hmm," she said and hung up.

At seven when he knocked on her door she answered immediately: She looked beautiful. She wore a filmy turquoise dress that fitted tightly to the waist, then flared out to swirl around her lovely legs. And sneakers.

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People in small towns have long memories . . .

THE RUNAWAYS



by
STEPHEN WASYLYK

The plate-glass window of the Fox River sheriff's office made it easy to see the expressions on the faces of the people approaching. So when Merle Conimaro swung his station wagon into the driveway and left it in a hurry all I said to Julio was, "Uh-oh," as I rose to meet him at the door.

I looked down at the tall man. Merle was thin and straight and weather-beaten, like a fence post that had survived many years of sun and storm.

"What's up, Merle?"

"You won't believe it, Gates."

"I won't believe what?"

"About five miles out of town. You want to go in my car?"

"If it's business, we use an official vehicle, Merle."

I beckoned to Julio and we all climbed into the four-wheel drive, Merle in the rear, my deputy beside me.

"Take the east road," said Merle.

As I headed out of town I asked, "What's the big secret?"

"Like I told you, you gotta see it. You know where the road curves as it climbs the mountain? About halfway up? The hill slopes away pretty steep. I was up there about an hour ago, changing a tire—"

"Why change it there?" asked Julio.

Merle's voice was disgusted. "Because it went flat there, that's why. You want me to ride on the rim or something?"

A slight smile broke under Julio's big black moustache. I knew what he was thinking. If anyone else had had that flat tire they would have struggled another hundred yards or so to where the road straightened out. But not Merle. He was stubborn and bull-headed, and, if the tire went flat on a curve it had to be fixed on a curve. He'd never understand that maybe he should have run a few feet farther. That would have been conceding something to the flat, or fate, or something—and Merle conceded nothing.

"So you had to change the tire?"

"I had no choice. I got the spare out and jacked her up and changed her. When I went to lower the jack, damned if my foot didn't kick the wheel cover and send it over the bank. It bounced down that hill like a jackrabbit and ran into the trees. That cover's worth maybe forty, fifty dollars, you know? I wasn't going to leave it. I went down after it."

"That wasn't too smart, Merle. That hill is too steep for a man to go barging down it alone. He might get hurt and he might not get up again without help."

"Hell, I know that. I had a tow-rope in the car and I tied it to the post to give me something to hold onto and went down after the damned thing. Well, I found it—but I found something else too, that I thought you should see."

"You mean you want *me* to go down that hill?"

"How else are you going to see what I found?"

Julio's grin got wider. "What's the matter with you, Gates? Did you expect Merle to bring it up?"

"Can't," said Merle. "It's too big."

"How big?"

"You'll see."

I glanced at Julio. He was still grinning. It was clear that if I wanted to see what Merle had found I'd have to go down that bank even though I'd put on a freshly cleaned uniform that morning.

We were climbing the two-lane macadam, the wire and post-guard rail to our right, the hill sloping away from us to the river far below, getting higher on the mountain with each turn of our wheels. Merle leaned between us and pointed. "There. See where I left the rope?"

One of the posts had a heavy line tied to it, the other end disappearing over the side. I pulled up. At that spot, the road had been built on top of fill, creating a steep embankment covered with coarse grass and weeds that fell abruptly to the trees.

"Let me go first," said Merle. "I know exactly where it is."

He stepped over the wire and started to back down the embankment, clinging to the rope.

"Want me to go?" asked Julio.

"I'm not that old. Besides, I'd rather have someone young and strong on top to pull us both up."

Holding the rope tightly and digging my feet in, I worked my way down to where the trees began and slid to a stop alongside Merle, who was standing near what appeared to be a thick pile of dead brush, partially covered by the stark limbs of a fallen sycamore.

"This is it?"

Merle nodded. "You're not going to believe it. I wouldn't have even known it was here if the sun hadn't caught the metal just right. What's a piece of metal doing there, I asked myself, so I dug into that pile a little." He pointed. "Take a look."

I worked my way over to the mound and found the spot he'd cleared. He'd pulled away enough brush to show a car beneath it.

It was plain enough what had happened. A long time ago, a car had left the road above and had plunged down here, probably so far and so damaged it wasn't worth dragging back to the road. Through the seasons the brush had grown close and the tree had fallen on it, and the whole thing had been layered with years of fallen leaves.

I looked down at my dirty uniform and felt the burning in my palms where the rope had slipped once or twice and I felt like kicking Merle's feet from under him and sending him tumbling to the river.

"You brought me down here to show me an old deserted car?"

He spat. "What am I, a Willie off the banana boat? I thought the same as you at first—just an old wreck—but poke your head in there and take a good look."

I worked my way closer and thrust my head into the hole he'd cleared.

The car was so old the windshield was vertical; cracked, but still intact. Through it I could see into the shadows of the interior.

There was a skeleton lying on the seat, as if the long-ago driver had lain down to rest.

I pulled and clawed more of the shrubbery loose and it wasn't until then that I realized a good deal of what I was pushing aside wasn't natural growth at all but dead saplings and shrubs carefully piled over the car to conceal it from the road above, and the storm-downed tree had fallen in just the right spot to finish the job.

I managed to get as far as the side window, broken out when the car had plunged down the embankment, and poked my head inside. The skeleton was on the smallish side. Most of the clothing had long since rotted away but enough of it was left, along with a pair of brown-and-white saddle oxfords still encasing the foot bones, to tell me it had been a woman.

I backed out and climbed the rope to the road and sent Julio back into town for help.

The car turned out to be a 1936 Ford roadster. We left it there and carefully transported the skeleton to Dr. Blenheim, who acted as the county medical examiner. He determined that the woman was probably in her late teens, and she had been dead before the car went over the hillside. A rib on her left side was shattered and a .38 slug still lodged in the left side of the spine. The only identification was a class ring from the local high school from the year 1940 with the initials HAJ engraved inside.

"There won't be anything in the files that old, or in the motor-vehicle bureau either," said Julio.

"We won't need any records," I said. "People in small towns have long memories. Once the word spreads about those initials we'll have plenty

of volunteers to tell us who she was. That doesn't worry me. The problem is, why didn't Hollister Peters find the car and body way back then?"

"I suppose you'll have to run out there and ask him, but it's been thirty years since he was sheriff and he may not remember."

I grinned. "He may be eighty, but his memory is better than yours or mine. I'll see you when I get back."

Hollister Peters had retired from office in the late Forties to devote himself to running his farm, one of the better ones in this mountainous county because it was down close to the river where the land was fairly flat and the soil rich. The drive took close to a half hour.

His wife led me around the house and pointed past the barn to the river flowing by some two hundred yards away. "You'll find him asleep down there, pretending he's fishing. Nothing much else for him to do these days since he turned the farm over to our son. Why do you need him?"

I told her about the car and the skeleton.

She frowned. "Has to be Hallie Jennings. Everyone thought she'd run off to New York City with Charlie Sinclair. But if she was shot, then only one person could have done it, and that was Charlie. But you let Hollister tell you. If he finds out I've been talking about it he'll get a little cranky. He never did like me interfering in his work."

She was right about Peters sleeping. His back was propped against a big oak, the rod was loose in his hands, and his hat was pulled down over his eyes. In his youth he'd been a big man, but now he appeared sun-dried and shrunken.

"Hello, Hollister," I said.

He stirred, pushed the hat back slowly, and looked up. "What the hell do you want, Gates?"

"A little help."

He pushed himself erect and put the rod aside. "I thought maybe you wanted to join me. I wouldn't have liked that. One-man job, fishing. Never wanted any companionship. What's on your mind?"

I told him what we'd found.

He nodded. "Hallie Jennings, for sure. Everybody thought she ran off with Charlie Sinclair. He disappeared at the same time."

He dug into his pocket, found a pipe, filled it, and fired it up. "No records after this long and only two people left who can tell you about

it—me and Ellis Nelson. I suppose he's still alive. I haven't heard of him dying."

"He's alive. I saw him the other day. What did he have to do with it?"

"He was Hallie's stepfather." He drew on the pipe and thoughtfully blew a slow stream of smoke. "It was right before the war. Charlie Sinclair was one of these young people who come up to work at the resorts in summer. Never knew much about him or where he came from, but—" He took the pipe from his mouth. "Ever come across someone you didn't want to turn your back on because you knew your skin would crawl?"

"One or two."

"That was Charlie. I don't know what it is about people like that. They look good on the outside, but something seems to be missing inside, or the gears in their heads don't mesh quite right. Good-looking guy, and plenty of brains, but when you talked to him you'd see something in his eyes that said he wasn't listening—that he didn't give a damn about you or anyone else and, if he could, he'd get rid of the lot. Hallie really should have had more sense than to get tangled up with him. Her father had been killed in an automobile accident and her mother Paula had married Ellis Nelson. Even back then, Ellis was doing all right in real estate. That's how he got rich. Real estate."

"I know."

"Well, Ellis and Paula tried to put a stop to her seeing Charlie, but Hallie wouldn't listen. The thing came to a head in late August. Ellis wanted to send her away to college but she wouldn't leave because of Charlie. One Friday night there was a big argument. She left the house saying she and Charlie were going to run away to New York City. She didn't come home that night. Ellis went looking for her in all the usual places but he couldn't find her. Finally he came to me, so I began to look around. She, her car, and Charlie were all gone. I put out a bulletin and notified the New York police, but no one ever did turn anything up. I didn't really expect much. You want to get lost, New York's the place to do it in. What surprised me was—knowing her and knowing Charlie—she should have been home in a few weeks a little ragged around the edges but a lot smarter. Charlie wasn't the type to stick to one woman."

I lobbed a pebble into the river. "Seems as though I've heard this story a hundred times."

"True. Not the first time a nice girl got tangled up with the wrong

man. That was why I was so willing to believe they'd run away together. But it really affected Hallie's mother. Since she'd lost her first husband, Paula really doted on that girl. Sometimes I think she only married Ellis to give Hallie a home. And Ellis was crazy about Paula. If the sun rose and set in the girl for the mother, it was the same for Ellis with his wife. She'd never been a strong woman and she just couldn't take the girl leaving. She died less than a year later, still hoping Hallie would come back. And all the time she was here, up on that mountain. I guess there's only one answer. Charlie killed her, drove that car off the road, hid it, and took off. It would have been easy to do that summer. The road wasn't quite finished and the guard rail wasn't up. Big storm that night too—so any sign could have washed away."

I thought of the big sycamore that had fallen across the car. "What reason would he have had to kill her?"

"I don't know, but it was in him, I can tell you that. There was always the feeling that if you pushed him too far he'd explode. Maybe Hallie did just that. This late in the game, who knows?"

I stood. "Are you sure there's no one besides Ellis who might help?"

He thought for a moment. "You can try Fitch Wittaker. He's about the only local I remember who was close to Charlie."

"Fitch Wittaker who owns those vacation cabins up the river?"

"The same. Come to think of it, Fitch was probably the only one who never believed they'd run away together. But no one paid any attention to him, including me. I guess I should have listened."

"I guess so."

I left the farm and drove up the road to a group of one-story wood-frame bungalows spread out along the river. At one time, cabins like that had provided rental revenue for their owners only during the summer, but since winter sports had become big the people who owned them had a year-round gold mine. I pulled up before a weatherbeaten sign attached to the wall of the one closest to the road. It had once read OFFICE but the O and the E had fallen off and never been replaced. I went in, found an empty little room with a desk, and shouted.

"I'm coming!" a heavy voice responded from somewhere inside the house. In a minute or two a short, heavy man ambled into the room. His face was square, his head almost bald. He had been buying stout men's clothing for a long time. He grinned when he saw me. "What law have I broken?"

"Would you like me to look around?"

He held up a hand. "Please don't. What can I do for you?"

I told him about the car and the skeleton.

"I'll be damned," he said softly.

He stared out of the window for a long time. "It was like I always said. Charlie never did run away with her."

"What made you so sure?"

"Charlie and I used to drink a lot of beer together. I knew damned well he didn't intend to marry anyone, including Hallie. That was her idea, not his. I'll tell you something, Gates, that nobody else knew. Charlie didn't love Hallie. Hell, he didn't even like her. I asked him why he bothered with her. He said she was his ticket out of Fox River. He wasn't going to work as a busboy in a resort hotel all his life."

"What did he mean by that?"

"He never said, but I think he was hoping Ellis Nelson would give him money to stay away from her. And if that was what he had in mind, he sure wouldn't have taken her away. There would have been nothing in it for him."

"If he didn't take her to New York, where did you think they'd gone?"

"I never could figure it out. All I knew was that he wouldn't have gone with her."

"Maybe he killed her and took off."

"Why should he kill her? I told you—he said she was his ticket out of here."

"He did disappear the same night. And she is dead," I said.

"Well, maybe someone killed him too. He might be lying out there in the woods someplace like her. He told me once that Ellis Nelson had told him to stay away from Hallie or he'd kill him."

"I can understand that. But Nelson would have no reason to kill his stepdaughter."

Wittaker shrugged. "It's too complicated for me."

"When did you last see Charlie?"

"The night they disappeared. We had a few beers and then he took off. Hallie was picking him up in her car. I never knew he was gone until the sheriff came around looking for the girl."

"It was a long time ago. Think about it. If you come up with anything I should know, call me."

"Sure will."

I drove to Ellis Nelson's real-estate office in town. The girl there told me that when Ellis had heard about the discovery he'd gone home.

It was a long, low, rambling stone ranch high up on a hill overlooking the town and the river, with a broad front lawn and a curving flagstone walk leading to the front door. Nelson had to be almost the equal of Hollister Peters in age, but while Hollister puttered around his farm and pretended to fish Nelson still went to his real-estate office every day and put in a full eight hours or more.

I rang the bell and waited. I tried several more times. There was no answer. I walked around to the rear and found a swimming pool and a patio with sliding glass doors, one of which stood open. I stepped inside.

Nelson was a tall man with white, wavy hair. He usually carried himself erect and with dignity, but right now he was slouched in a leather-covered wing chair, his eyes half closed. The table beside him held a quart of liquor and a small bottle of pills. I felt his pulse. It was slow and faint.

I snatched up the phone and dialed for an ambulance.

He smiled up at me weakly. "Don't waste your time. I killed her, you know."

"Why?"

"Accident." His speech was faint. "Tried to kill Charlie and missed."

"What happened to Charlie?"

He lifted a hand with great effort and indicated his desk. Then the hand fell and his chin dropped to his chest. I could already hear the wailing of the ambulance siren. Nelson always had an eye for good real estate, but when he'd built his house here it had probably never occurred to him that he was less than a mile from the hospital. At this point that could be worth a great deal to him.

After the ambulance had taken him away I went to his desk. In the center was a huge wad of cancelled checks, each made out for one hundred dollars to Philip Daly. I fanned through them. The first was dated September 1940. There was one for each month of each year since—more than forty years of checks, totalling more than forty-eight thousand dollars.

Several hours later, Dr. Blenheim came out of Nelson's hospital room. "You can talk to him now, but don't overdo it. It was a near thing and he's not a young man."

I went in. Nelson's white hair fanned out over the pillow case, his hands at his sides, his eyes closed. They opened when I reached the bed. He said, "You shouldn't have called the ambulance, Gates."

"You know better. Do you feel strong enough to tell me about it? If not it can wait. After forty years, another day will make no difference."

"I told you. I killed her. Isn't that enough?"

"Not for me."

He sighed. "She stormed out of the house that night, saying she and Charlie were going to run away to New York and get married and there was nothing we could do about it. Her mother was almost hysterical. She begged me to go after her and stop her. I had to do something. I took the gun I kept in the house and went after her. I had been to see Charlie a couple of days before to ask him to leave Hallie alone. Sure, he said—how much would I pay? I told him I wouldn't give him a dime, that if I gave him money he'd only be back for more. I'd kill him first. He laughed. He said that before he was through with us I'd sing a different tune.

"I saw her pick him up and I followed them. I passed the car and cut them off. When they stopped I went back to the car. Charlie was in the passenger's seat. I yanked open the door and pointed the gun at him and told him to get out. I remember Hallie sitting there with her hands frozen to the wheel, her eyes white in the glow of the headlights, staring at me as if I was crazy. Maybe I was. But that damned Charlie jumped me as he was getting out and the gun went off and he hit me with something he had in his hand."

His eyes closed and then opened wide, as if he had seen a memory that frightened him. "I don't know how long I was unconscious. When I came to, Charlie was sitting beside me, the gun in his hand. Hallie was slumped behind the wheel. I'd killed her, he said. I came apart then. I guess any man would. She was dead. I'd be arrested, put on trial, and sent to prison. But worse than that was what it would do to her mother. She could never take Hallie's dying. And even if somehow she did, she'd be through with me."

He covered his face with his hands. "Everything fell to pieces. I leaned against the car, half sick, my mind numb, and that damned Charlie stood there in the headlights asking how much it would be worth if no one knew what happened. I told him I'd give him anything he wanted. 'Give me the money in your pocket,' he said, 'and go home.' If anyone asked

I hadn't seen either one of them. He'd take care of everything. He'd be in touch, he said, and if I didn't pay he'd come back to Fox River and tell Hollister I'd killed her."

His fingers plucked at the sheet. "Understand, Gates—right then I would have agreed to anything to buy time. I gave him a hundred dollars I had on me and went home. I told Paula I'd looked all over but couldn't find them, and that was what I told Hollister the next day when I reported Hallie missing.

"The weeks passed. Hallie, Charlie, and the car had all disappeared. Everyone accepted the fact that they'd run away together. The only thing that kept her mother going was the hope that we'd hear from Hallie any day. But if I couldn't tell her on the night it happened I sure couldn't tell her afterward. Several weeks later I received a letter from Philip Daly marked 'Personal.' It said to send him a hundred dollars a month as his share of our real-estate deal. Since I'd never dealt with anyone named Daly, I knew he had to be Charlie. I sent the check and I've been sending them ever since."

"Strange he didn't ask for more."

"In those days that was a good piece of money. I was paying my secretary ten dollars a week. But I didn't care about the money. The hard part was sitting and watching her mother fade away, always hoping Hallie would come back, and knowing I could do nothing. After she died, none of it mattered any more, but I sent the checks anyway. At least she never knew I'd killed her daughter."

"You didn't know what Charlie had done with the car and the body?"

"Not until today." His voice had been growing weaker, the pauses more frequent.

"Get some sleep," I said. "We'll talk more later."

I went back to his house and leafed through the checks. All had been endorsed by Philip Daly and deposited in a Buffalo, New York, bank. Sometime in 1944 there was a significant change in the signature and it had stayed that way ever since. Nelson had one of those circular address card files on his desk. I flipped through it. There was one for Philip Daly in Buffalo.

Back at the office, Julio had one comment. "The whole thing is crazy."

"Sure it is. But people do crazy things. You'll be in charge here tomorrow. I'm going up to Buffalo."

"To bring back Philip Daly?"
"To hear his side of the story."

The houses in the neighborhood had been reshingled, resided, refurbished, and renewed. The red-brick apartment house stood out among them like a dowdy dowager.

I found the apartment and knocked. The seamed face of an elderly woman peered through the crack allowed by the security chain. She was small and stout, her hair grey.

I told her who I was and that I wanted to talk to Philip Daly.

She laughed. "Philip Daly's been dead since 1944. He was killed in Italy during the war. The Army tried to cover it up, but someone who was there said he was knifed in a brawl in a bar. That was like him."

I held up one of Nelson's checks. "If he's been dead since 1944, who's been cashing these?"

One hand covered her mouth and her eyes went wide and frightened. "Oh, Lord!"

"You have?"

"You're not going to arrest me or anything?"

"No. I just want to know what happened."

She unfastened the chain and I went inside. The small apartment was clean and sparsely furnished. Her right hand touched her hair and smoothed her housedress as though the primping would ease the words that followed. Her left hand remained at her side. "Listen, I meant no harm. I mean, it was money coming to Phil from a business deal and I was his widow—I was entitled to it, wasn't I?"

"Why didn't you inform the man sending the checks that your husband was dead?"

"Let me tell you how it was. After Phil was drafted the checks kept coming. I used to send them to him to be endorsed, but then he went overseas and I thought, why go through all that? So I began signing them myself and depositing them to our joint account. No one at the bank noticed anything or said anything, so I kept on. When he was killed I never changed the account. A teller once asked about my husband. I said he was an invalid. The checks kept coming, so I kept signing them. It was his money, and I was entitled to it, wasn't I?" Her eyes were really frightened now. "I mean, I'm not going to have to pay it back or anything like that? Because I can't."

"I don't have an answer for you."

"I need that money, Sheriff." She grasped her left elbow with her right hand and caressed it, evidently an old habit. She saw my glance and smiled wryly. "Phil left me something to remember him by. The last time he was home we were walking down the street and I said something he didn't like. He smashed me into a brick wall. I've never had full use of my arm since. A woman with a bad arm doesn't find work easy to get—or another husband. I need that money, Sheriff. I always needed it or I wouldn't have taken it, and now I need it more than ever. It isn't going to stop, is it? I've always been worried about that."

"It depends on the man sending those checks. He's been paying for a long time and he might feel he's paid enough. All I can tell you is that it would have made a big difference if he'd known your husband was dead."

She covered her face with her hand.

"A hundred dollars a month," she whispered. "Where will I ever get a hundred dollars a month?"

I had no idea of her income, but she wasn't living in luxury. It was clear the money was important to her.

I headed back to Fox River.

Ellis Nelson was still in his hospital bed, sitting up and looking a great deal stronger.

"I was expecting you, Gates. There's no statute of limitations on murder, is there?"

"Did you ever wonder why you never heard from Charlie Sinclair again?"

"No. A bargain is a bargain. I kept my end."

"To someone like him that wouldn't have mattered. If he'd lived, he would have bled you for far more than a hundred a month."

His head cocked to one side. "If he had lived?"

"He died in Italy in 1944. You've been sending those checks to his widow for thirty-six years, and she's been endorsing them."

He digested the words, then nodded. "So I didn't have to pay, did I?"

"You didn't have to pay at all. You didn't kill Hallie."

He shook his head. "I told you—the gun went off and she was dead."

"You were on the passenger side of the car when you fired. She was behind the wheel. The bullet would have entered her right side. When

Blenheim examined the skeleton he found a left rib shattered and the slug lodged in the left side of the spine. While you were unconscious, Charlie saw the way to get the money he wanted. He walked around the car, opened the door, and shot Hallie, then told you that you'd killed her. Since you had no reason to think otherwise, you believed him. He read you right, Ellis. He knew you'd do anything to keep your wife from knowing you killed her daughter."

He sank back against the pillow weakly and closed his eyes.

I waited.

"I always felt there was something wrong with that boy, but I never thought he was capable—"

"Hollister Peters did. If you had gone to him he'd have looked a little harder, maybe found her and taken you off the hook. You wouldn't have spent forty years paying for something you didn't do."

His voice was a whisper. "It's nice to know I didn't kill her. But it really doesn't change anything, does it?"

I knew he was thinking of Hallie's mother. "Not a thing."

"This woman who's been cashing the checks. What's she like?"

"Old, concerned about collecting that money all these years, and worried about losing it because she's always needed it, now more than ever."

He made a little gesture. "I don't care about the money. She's not responsible for any of this, and knowing I didn't kill Hallie is worth something, isn't it?"

"I suppose so."

For the first time a smile tugged at his lips. "You say she needs the money?"

I thought of the woman caressing her arm. "That was my impression."

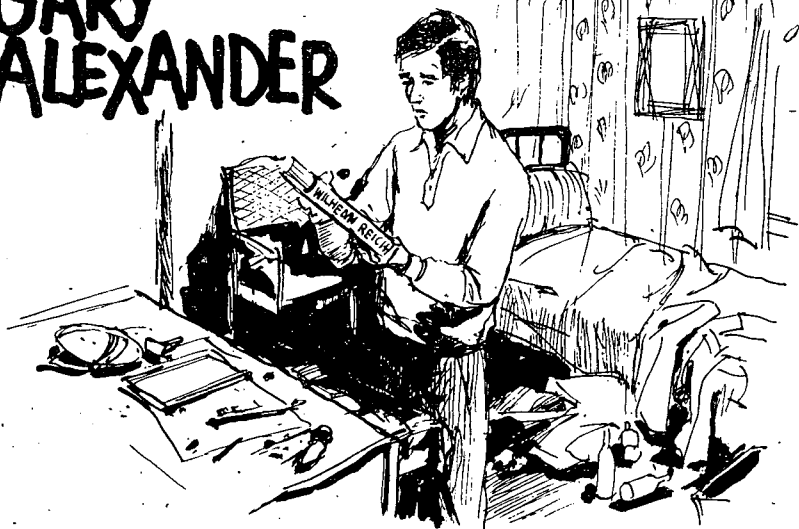
I left the hospital knowing he'd continue to send that hundred a month. The smile had given him away. It must have given him as much satisfaction to know that Charlie never really benefited from his blackmail and that the money had gone into the hands of someone who needed it as it did to know he hadn't killed Hallie.

It wasn't much of a victory, but it was enough.

One wino carving up another doesn't get much attention . . .

THE CONFESSION

by
**GARY
ALEXANDER**



Three years now with the Public Defender's Office, and I've absorbed one glaring truth that I'll carry with me for the rest of my life: while human life is held sacrosanct in our society, the *degree* of sanctity varies widely depending on the individual. You, me, everybody; we quantify the hell out of it, and we do it without even assigning a numerical value.

Take Joey Hill, for instance, and the man they arrested for his murder. A pair of bums; drifters, street-corner alcoholics. The indifference and

the lack of intensity by almost all involved in the case led me to believe that if figured on a scale of one to ten, neither man would have rated higher than 1.6.

Joey Hill was found on the back stairwell of a skid-row hotel, his throat neatly cut from ear to ear. A suspect was apprehended fifteen minutes later a block away, his hands and his clothing wet with blood, the probable murder weapon in his pocket. As I understand, he had confessed to detectives promptly and with little urging.

Alvin Harris called me into his office the morning after and handed me the file. "Here's an easy one, Dave," he said wryly. "Maybe you can process it without playing detective. For once."

We are a small office in a medium-sized town: Alvin Harris and three deputies, including myself. Harris has been on the staff for twenty years, in charge for the past twelve. Us peons are typical of the deputy defenders Alvin has had over the years. We all signed on at low pay right out of law school, partly for the experience, partly to purge the idealism from our systems before moving on to the big bucks. I'm overdue now by normal standards, but I haven't quite been able to make the change. Don't ask me why; I don't know.

The file was extraordinarily thick for its newness. Alvin had stopped at Homicide on his way to work and picked up copies of what they had thus far.

"If you want to play Crusader Rabbit on this one, Clay, plea-bargain it down to murder two," Harris said. "That's the best anyone could do, and probably more than this Brand deserves."

I scanned the file. The suspect, Michael Brand, had much in common with the late Joey Hill. Both were transients in their early forties. Both lived in the hotel where the crime took place, but on different floors.

"Two bums, two drifters without a pot or a window, who probably got into a beef over a jug of fortified wine," Harris went on. "Many of our clients come from this class of society, as you well know, Dave. All Brand did was cost us taxpayers some money."

I'll grant Harris this: he'll go to the wall for you on a tricky case if he believes you're right. But the pat cases—the ones he says are "like shooting fish in a rain barrel"—he wants expedited, regardless of charge or potential penalty. After twenty years in civil service he regards his function too often as one who lubricates the movement of paper.

The photograph of the victim was graphic. When I finally leave the

Public Defender's Office my specialty will *not* be criminal law. The picture of the weapon found on Brand, a surgeon's scalpel, gleamed, a reflection of the photographer's strobe.

"Somehow, in his stupor, he managed to wipe it clean of blood," Alvin said.

The copy of the confession seemed muddled. The dialogue in it was vague and agreeable, as if Brand's only concern was the convenience of the detectives.

I closed the folder and stood up. "I'll go over to see him."

"His hearing will probably come up in about a week. Sniff around at Homicide too. They don't have a full workup on Joey Hill yet, but everything indicates that he was a bad actor. Looks good for murder two if your homework's done."

"This confession, Alvin. It isn't overly convincing. It seems almost casual."

Harris shook his head and sighed loudly. "You want the Gettysburg Address? This is a drunken bum! His blood-alcohol reading was 1.79! He was marinated at the time!"

Then he added, as I reached the door, "Move him along for a quick wrap-up. Just like shooting fish in a rain barrel."

Our county-city building is not known for its opulent accommodations. Never have I heard an outcry from conservatives complaining that our slammer is a country club. The Hilton, as it's known, occupies the fourth and fifth floors. Maximum security, one-man cells, take up part of a wing on the fifth.

I was shown into a cubbyhole of iron and concrete. Michael Brand sat on his cot and looked up at me with an obvious lack of interest. I introduced myself and offered my hand, which he pointedly refused, pressing his hands flat on his standard-issue coveralls.

Brand looked younger than forty-two, perhaps because of his round face, its ruddy excess stretching out the crow's-feet. He wore rimless eyeglasses and his battle against a retreating hairline was all but lost. He was pudgy and listed in his file as five-six. Joey Hill had been well over six feet tall and beefy.

"Sorry for the inconvenience, Mr. Clay," Brand said softly. "I imagine your caseload is staggering as it is."

Clipped tones, good enunciation, instinctively grammatical. Odd. In

his alleged peer group, a high school diploma would qualify one as a scholar, an intellectual.

"Would you care to tell me what happened?"

Brand shrugged. "I suppose you have all that information. I was not, at the critical moment—well, functioning at full mental capacity. A disagreement, perhaps. What's the point? By some miracle, did you happen to bring a little hair of the proverbial dog?"

"No, I didn't. Were you acquainted with the victim?"

Another shrug. "Who remembers faces in that nether world?"

"Where did you get the scalpel?"

Brand smiled and took the cigarette I offered. "You really should browse the pawn shops in that area, Mr. Clay. An amazing variety of merchandise. I admire fine steel and in my world you need to protect yourself. Often."

"Like last night?"

An emphatic *no*.

I explained the procedure, the upcoming hearing at which he would likely be charged with murder, the subsequent trial, and the good possibility of a reduced charge. "No witnesses, I understand. Extenuating circumstances—"

"No! Loopholes, technicalities. No more. A lifetime of being a parasite, a totally useless person. No. I took a man's life and this is a debt I intend to fulfill."

He meant it, at least for the moment. His face had turned the color of rouge. I knew it was hopeless to press now. Guilt, remorse, whatever—I'd witnessed this reaction before. It was too soon, the memory of the act too vivid, the blood not yet dry in Brand's tortured mind.

I decided to snoop around and get back to him in a day or so. I got up and told him my plans. I extended my hand again.

Same reaction, but I held it out until he relented and gave me a limp handshake. Firm flesh on the fingers, the skin soft; a curious combination for a lifelong derelict whose only known occupation was that of day laborer.

Detectives Oakes and Harper held down the fort at Homicide. Oakes was in, nibbling at the mountain of paperwork on his desk, while Harper was out shaking down Brand's and Hill's rooms at the fleabag. Both were good men, fair and analytical. If a suspect's guilt proved too questionable

to take to court, neither feared marching upstairs to the Prosecuting Attorney and telling him that he'd best seek his TV news exposure on some other case.

On the Brand matter, I received from Oakes a mixture of confidence and boredom. "One wino carves up wino number two. That's the ballgame; Clay."

"Anything solid on the victim yet?" I asked.

Oakes handed me a tearsheet. "Yeah. Even if Mr. Hill didn't have a prior engagement, I doubt he'd be guest of honor at the Jaycees' next banquet."

I couldn't disagree. Hill had been in and out of trouble since his teens, mostly in. He'd served hard time for assault and armed robbery. I was hopeful, contemplating a drop of the charges down to manslaughter, provided Brand cooperated.

"A guy I know in detox grabbed him one night," Oakes went on. "The usual thing. Load 'em up when you see them stumbling down skid row, haul 'em to the hospital, and air out their livers for a couple of days. Well, they came upon Joey Hill one night and they had to call a black-and-white. It took four guys to get him in the van and the straps cinched up. A lovely human being."

"How about Brand? What do we know about him?"

Oakes gave me his personal-effects envelope, the belongings that had been taken from him when he was booked. It amounted to a wallet and a wedding ring. There was a hundred and fifty-six dollars in the wallet. For skid row that could have been the entire output of King Solomon's mines.

"Hill was a pool player," Oakes said. "He was no Minnesota Fats, but he had an eye for seeing rules violations on the part of his opponents, which naturally gave him the wager on the basis of default, if you know what I mean. The regulars in those dives ran for cover whenever he asked for a game. They knew better. Hill was much better with the butt end of a pool cue than the tip. He did a lot of business with sailors on payday. We figure Brand caught Hill in a weak moment when he passed out on that stairway. Hill wasn't what you'd call a social drinker."

Besides the cash I found a birth certificate stating that Michael W. Brand had entered the world forty-two years ago at a hospital in Omaha. I also found three library cards from three different cities. I should have been surprised, but after having talked to him I wasn't.

"Social-security card?" I asked.

"Nope. But that's not unusual for these people. They've had lunch on Mars about as often as they've held steady jobs."

"Fingerprints?"

"Negative," Oakes said. "Washington has zilch. There again, not conclusive or otherwise. If the guy had no priors—which he doesn't—and if he wasn't in the military, he wouldn't necessarily be on file. I hear the wheels turning, Clay. Forget it. Quit wasting your time. You're trying to do your job, which I admire, but just tell Brand not to make waves and he can be out in thirteen years, four months. Maybe a lot sooner on a reduced charge. That's more than winos on the outside get: three hots and a cot. You can't beat it with a stick."

"Mind if I look through their rooms?"

"Help yourself."

I did, wondering if I was just wasting my time or if the seedy rooms contained something that would confirm my uncertainty about Brand's guilt. Joey Hill's didn't; just the usual empty bottles and soiled clothing.

Michael Brand's room was located on the third floor, one above Hill's. The room, like Hill's, wasn't much larger than Brand's jail cell, but it smelled much worse, the odors of poverty pervading it as they did the entire hotel.

Again, I found the usual possessions of a man on the skids: dirty clothes, bottles, seldom-used toilet articles. But there was one interesting exception. A number of library books were scattered around the room, some from the local library, others from other cities. Kafka, Wilhelm Reich, Dostoyevsky, Mark Twain. This wasn't normal reading for a skid-row derelict, and not very upbeat either.

Brand's battered suitcase was only partially unpacked. Brand had told the detectives that he was new in town, and the desk clerk had confirmed that he'd checked in late last week. I pawed through it and came upon something almost as out of character as the books—an old T-shirt with a sports logo faded nearly beyond recognition. The logo itself was sort of circular but I couldn't distinguish its exact design. Part of it, though, was the word OILERS.

The Houston Oilers football team? No. Wrong colors. I'm a TV sports nut and since I'd subscribed to the cable, tripling the number of available stations, I watched games and sports I'd never thought of before—Australian rugby, English soccer, ping-pong, you name it. One cable network tele-

casts nothing but sports. I'm a bachelor and I live alone, so I can get away with squandering my free time that way.

I studied the T-shirt again, but it just didn't register. I made a mental note to investigate it further when I got home to my stack of sports magazines.

I left the room and the hotel and walked to the nearest bar, which was two doors down. I have a theory about skid-row drifters. While they have no roots, while they call no city and no dwelling home, when they drift through, a nearby bar often serves to provide stability. The familiar faces and surroundings tend to act as a temporary anchor.

This bar smelled as bad as the hotel, only smokier. I was dressed in slacks and a pullover shirt. I didn't fit in and was regarded with suspicious glances by the bartender and two-thirds of the patrons in the dive. Alvin Harris continually screams at me to wear a suit and tie. Luckily I didn't obey his orders today; if I had, I'd never have learned anything from these people.

Not that I got much. They knew Joey Hill well. They knew about the murder. Not a single tear had been shed. They also knew that a suspect had been arrested.

I described Michael Brand to the bartender and the people sitting at the bar. An old woman to my right remembered him but said nothing specific about him. I told the bartender to fill her wineglass and that jogged her memory slightly.

"A loner," she said. "In here the last few days. Real quiet. Sat by himself. Got a load on and staggered out."

"Did you see him with Joey Hill?"

"Nope. Never did. And Hill didn't come in much any more. Too much trouble."

"He was in last night, come to think of it," the bartender said.

I bought him a drink too and he continued. "I was off. The night bartender was by earlier, said Hill got into a big argument with a couple of jokers over a pool game. He threatened to call the law, so Hill and the other guys eased off. Then they left."

"Together?"

"Who keeps track?"

"Did the night bartender know them?"

"He thought maybe he'd seen them around. Somebody at the bar thought they were staying over at the Wilson Street Mission."

"Did you or the night bartender tell that to the police?"

The bartender and the old woman laughed, in unison. "They haven't been in to ask. And who cares?"

"That guy who carved him, is he gonna get the chair?" the old woman asked.

"I doubt it."

She finished her tokay in one gulp and said, "Just as well. Did the public a service."

I thanked them and walked out feeling a chill, although it was summer and the bar wasn't air-conditioned.

I drove to my apartment and sifted through the piles of sports magazines I hadn't gotten around to throwing out. Half an hour later I matched the logo on the T-shirt to the appropriate team. A hunch struck me simultaneously. I rushed back to the office to wreak havoc on Alvin Harris's budget.

All long-distance calls from our office are to be logged on a form designed by Alvin Harris. Alvin reviews the log sheet daily and either initials each notation or chews some ass. Our office telephone expense has diminished impressively since Alvin instituted this system. Alvin seems to think that if he finishes a fiscal year under budget, he'll be regarded as some sort of hero by the powers-that-be. He may be right.

I was on the line to the Douglas, Nebraska, County Courthouse when Alvin walked in after lunch. I'd just confirmed Michael Brand's birth registration in Omaha and requested another department, where I was languishing on hold.

Alvin glanced at the log sheet, then at me, and stood patiently before my desk, demonstrating his ability to turn crimson.

"Yes, thank you," I said, and hung up.

"Is this about your switchblade artist?" he demanded.

"It is. I just confirmed that Michael Wayne Brand was born in an Omaha hospital on November 27, 1938."

"You're raising holy hell with *our* budget to do what the police already did?" Alvin asked evenly.

He looked like a clenched fist.

"I also checked with the people who handle death certificates. Michael Wayne Brand died on December 2, 1938."

I had set Alvin up beautifully. He stared at me for a moment, absorbing

my last statement. Then he threw up his hands and walked away. Body language, I believe they call it. Alvin had just given me carte blanche. As soon as his office door slammed, I dialed the long-distance operator again.

I had what I needed the afternoon before Brand's hearing. I entered his cell with my ammunition and simply asked, "Why?"

Brand looked up at me from his bunk and blinked. He seemed logy, even less concerned about his plight than on my first visit.

"Why what?"

"If this is your idea of suicide, forget it. Yes, the death penalty is back on the books; but after all this time the mice have probably eaten the insulation out of the works inside the electric chair. Even if they got it functional, no way would you get an appointment with it. Judge Whitten is our guy tomorrow. In the late sixties, while he was going to law school, he was involved in every campus demonstration. Even now he's not exactly the darling of the local reactionaries. You'll get murder two whether you allow me to plead for it or not. And the facts are so shaky you'll probably get a dismissal when your trial comes up. I haven't pressed the police about extending their investigation and coming up with the real killer, but I damn sure will."

"I told you what I did," Brand said calmly. "And I told the police. Facts are facts. If you want to be cute, Mr. Clay, do it elsewhere."

I lighted a cigarette and offered one to Brand, which he accepted. "You know," I told him, "I like to watch TV sports. I signed up for the cable last year and they have a hookup with the Canadian channels. I watched a lot of hockey. The Edmonton Oilers were on sometimes. I saw them get killed at Montreal, totally destroyed. Sure; that Gretzky line scores a ton of goals, but there isn't much firepower after that. Goaltending is O.K., but the defense isn't what you'd call stingy. I figure next season will be pretty rough for them."

Brand straightened up, brightened, reacted instinctively. "That shows what you know! We had a good junior draft. Several promising prospects. And with a trade or two, we'll be right up—" He stopped and stared at his feet.

I said, "Your prints didn't connect in Washington, Dr. Hauser. That's understandable. You're a Canadian citizen. The FBI was no help, but the Royal Canadian Mounted Police was. I didn't know who else to call.

Sergeant Preston and his wonder dog King and all that. I figured it was the place to start. They directed me to the proper agency in Ottawa. I sent your prints up fast, and confirmation came back equally fast."

Dr. Jerome Hauser broke down. When he composed himself, he told all: creeping alcoholism, marital erosion, the pressure of being an esteemed neurosurgeon called in on the most difficult cases, one day too many of entering the surgical theater numbed by his morning whiskey, one day when his skill wasn't sufficient to compensate for his condition.

"The attorney-client relationship, Mr. Clay? Are you sworn to confidentiality?" he asked.

"Certainly."

"Then you must consider what I've said and what I will tell you now just such a confidentiality. I've been on the road for some months. Your fair city happened to be in my blurred path. My room in that hotel was near the back stairs, so I customarily used them. As I was going out for more wine, I came upon Joey Hill. I tried to stop the bleeding but soon realized it had stopped, along with his heart. I managed to make quite a mess of myself in the attempt and panicked and ran.

"When I was caught, I was frightened at first, but then I saw it as a chance to make amends for that patient I butchered. Our medical fraternity is as clubby as yours, so all I received was a license revocation. That wasn't enough for what I'd done. I killed a man. I intend to stand charges for the murder of another. I will be punished vicariously. It won't matter to either victim, but it does to me."

He was talking like a crazy man who wasn't crazy. He was obviously self-destructive, but he'd laid out his motivation calmly and clinically. I didn't know how to reply without alienating him, so I approached him from a flank. "The scalpel they found on you?"

"Oh, that was mine. A remnant of my former life I couldn't bear to give up."

"The same with the T-shirt?"

"That too. Even if you vanish from your past world, you cling to some reminder of better days. After all, I have nothing else."

"No wife? No family?"

Dr. Hauser laughed coldly. "I would think not, considering all I've done."

He'd given me an opening. I turned over my hole card.

"I called your wife last night," I said, glancing at my watch for effect.

"Her plane from Edmonton is scheduled to leave in about fifteen minutes."

Judge Whitten couldn't, of course, order the charges dropped merely on the basis of Jérôme Hauser's testimony, but he did postpone the hearing for another week when I explained that new evidence might be forthcoming.

Three days later he did drop the charges when the real killers were brought in. I'd relayed the remark about the pair who had argued with Joey Hill, the two reputed to have been staying at the Wilson Street Mission, to Homicide and the police located them just as they were packing to leave. One wore a gaudy onyx ring identified as belonging to Joey Hill. Ownership of the ring was verified by several locals who were familiar with it on close, personal terms—Hill had used it like brass knuckles.

I drove Dr. and Mrs. Hauser to the airport to catch their flight back to Canada. Hauser looked better than he had and informed me he was all done with self-pity and dark literature; he would confine his reading to medical journals and try to get his license restored, though he didn't think that was a promising possibility. But he had a brother with some prime wheat acreage who needed help. He might try that instead. His plans were unfocused, really, but he was optimistic about the future.

I'd suggested that he inquire with a large local pharmaceutical manufacturer, figuring that they might have openings for someone with his experience, license or no license.

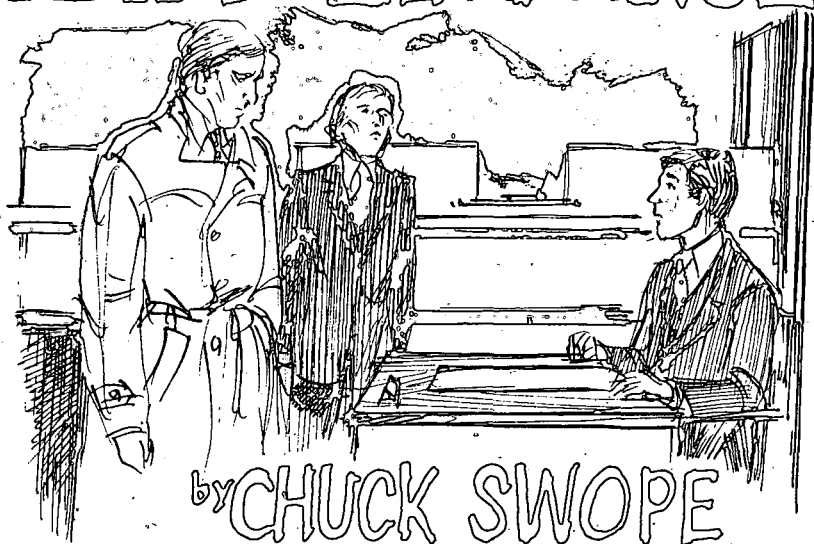
No, he said, just as his flight was called, thanks anyway.

Mrs. Hauser smiled, explaining. "We couldn't stay down here. The hockey season begins soon and I've already bought season tickets."



Big Benny wanted to go to Canada and start a new life . . .

HARD EVIDENCE



Big Benny was about to get out of jail and I was scared. We did a bank job together five years ago and, as luck would have it, I got away and Big Benny got caught. I got away with the loot; Big Benny took the heat; and like a true pal he never ratted on me. The only trouble was that Big Benny would now expect his share of the swag, and I didn't have it.

I would have had it—I fully intended to have it—but somehow I got caught up in a series of bad investments, and before I knew what had hit

me the money was gone. I had papered my bathroom with parimutuel tickets from the race track as a joke, but Big Benny wouldn't think it was funny. I just couldn't pick a winner to save my life, and now it looked like it had come down to that.

Every time there was a knock at the door I cringed, fearful that Big Benny had come to claim his reward for keeping his mouth shut. Oh, I could have run away, and the thought did cross my mind, but I'm not really that type of person. I at least owed Big Benny an explanation and a chance to poke me if he wanted to. I just hoped he'd stop at that.

A few suspense-filled days went by. Then one night I answered one of those fearsome knocks and there he was in all his ugly glory. He was still a fearsome sight, even allowing for the weight loss from eating prison food.

"Well, hi, Big Benny. You're lookin' fine, boy, just fine."

He extended a big paw and pushed me back into the room. "You're lookin' fine too, Weasel. Now gimme my money," he growled.

I swallowed hard. This was the moment I had been dreading. "Well, you see, I don't have it. There's a little problem about the money."

He stared at me long and hard. His piggy little eyes smoldered.

"Dang it all," I spluttered, "I went plumb loco and lost the money at the track. I'm sorry—I'm really sorry."

"All of it? You lost the whole hunnert grand?"

I nodded and smiled weakly. He flicked a hand at me and I went head over shoe leather and rebounded off the far wall. He was big but fast as a cobra with his mitts. He hovered over me, his fists doubled, tears of rage erupting from his eyes.

"I'm gonna kill yuh, Weasel!" he bellowed. "I'm gonna flat kill yuh." He reached for me and I scurried away like a frightened squirrel.

"Wait, Big Benny! Killing me won't get the money back. Do you want to go back to jail, maybe even the gas chamber?"

He thought about it for a few seconds and the fire in his eyes dimmed. He really wasn't a mean person, but he was dangerous as a runaway train when he was riled. He unclenched his fists, grabbed a chair, and sat down. It was going to be O.K.

"Aw, Weasel," he said, "now what am I gonna do? I'm flat broke. I was going to take that dough and go to Canada and buy me some land. I was going to hunt and fish and breathe some good clean air for a change."

"You mean you was going to go straight?"

"Yeah, I was. I'm tired of prisons and hiding out all the time."

"That's just great," I said enthusiastically. "You know, I been straight myself the whole time you been gone. I even bought me a little shoe-repair shop with some of the heist money. Of course, that was before I got hooked on the ponies. Hey, I guess by rights the shop's half yours. You wanna be partners with me?"

"Naw, I don't think so, Weasel. I kinda had my heart set on going to Canada."

I looked at the big lug slouched in the chair, the deep hurt and disappointment etched in the craggy lines of his face.

"Look," I said, "how did we get that money anyway? We robbed us a bank, right? So let's you and me do one more little heist, then go on the straight and narrow."

"Gee, I don't know," he said with an uncertain tremor in his voice. "I don't think I could stand it if I got caught again and had to go back to the joint."

"Don't worry about a thing," I reassured him. "It was plain bad luck that you got caught last time. It couldn't happen again—not in a million years. Besides, it's the only way I can think of to square things with you."

"O.K., Weasel, you talked me into it. But this is it! After this one I go straight."

The next day I took the few miserable bucks I had left and bought us a couple of bus tickets to Las Vegas. I figured we'd hit a bank there. I never liked to pull a heist in my own back yard, so to speak.

"When you steal the wheels," Big Benny wheezed as the oppressive Vegas heat slammed down on us like a steamroller, "make sure they got air-conditioning."

I nodded in agreement. As it turned out, stealing the car was as simple as sin. We sauntered into a busy casino parking lot and waited for the valets to get a few cars behind, then we took one right off the front of the line with the keys already in it. It could be hours before they even missed it. That was another reason I chose Vegas to do our little number.

"If the bank job goes this smooth," Big Benny said, laughing, "I'm as good as on my way to Canada."

"Don't worry about a thing," I said. "We'll use the same gimmick as last time. Everything's in my bag. Start getting rigged up and we'll get it over with."

By the time I'd pulled up in front of a suitable-looking bank Big Benny was all rigged for action. It was the old human-bomb-scare trick, the idea being that we convince the bank to give us their money or Big Benny would trigger all that dynamite he had strapped to his chest and we'd all be blown to hell. The dynamite was real enough, but the wires going to Benny's pocket ended there, without a trigger.

We entered the bank and walked over to an important-looking three-piece-suit type who was sitting at a desk looking bored. We were about to liven things up for him.

"My friend's wearing a bomb," I said in a hushed voice as I leaned over his desk. "Lead us to someone who can give us lots of money or we'll all be blown to tiny bits."

The three-piece suit looked up disgustedly like he thought I was ribbing him, then went all popeyed as Benny parted the raincoat he was wearing and showed him the ugly sticks of dynamite with the wires leading to his pocket.

"In case you don't know what a dead man's switch is, my friend," I said in my best impression of Clint Eastwood, "he's holding onto one inside his pocket. If he lets go we'll be finishing this little talk at the River Jordan. You dig?"

The man slowly stood up. "Come with me," he said, "and please be careful."

A few minutes later we rushed from the bank with a suitcase full of money and a pretty young bank teller for a hostage. I laid rubber getting us away from there.

We were tooling along and getting pretty far out into the desert when my ears picked up the faint sound of police sirens. "Uh-oh, pal. I hear the sound of coppers."

"Gun it!" Big Benny ordered. "Why are they chasing us? They know we got us a hostage and a bomb."

I shrugged.

"You know cops—they just got to see for themselves."

"C'mon, Weasel, get us out of here! I can't face another long stretch—I just can't!"

"Don't worry. We got a good lead on them. Besides, we got us this hostage. That was our big mistake last time; we didn't get no hostage."

"Yeah—that plus your crazy driving," Big Benny said.

I turned and gave him a toothy grin. "You know I'm one of the best wheel men that—" I stopped when I noticed that Big Benny's mouth had dropped open and he was all pop-eyed like Rodney Dangerfield. He waved frantically and tried to holler, but no sound came from his mouth. I snapped my head back around to face the road but it was too late. A windshield full of station wagon was coming straight into us. I wrenched the steering wheel with all my might but the sickening sound of metal ripping and tearing hit me in the ears.

The next thing I knew, my door had popped open and I was sprawling onto the stony, prickly desert. It's not all sand out there, you know. I had the wind knocked out of me, but other than that I had only a couple of cuts and bruises and some prickly things sticking in me.

I could still hear the wailing of the police sirens, but they were quite a ways off yet.

I quickly surveyed the situation. The driver of the station wagon was lying on the ground, unmoving—either dead or unconscious. Things were so quiet inside our car too I figured Benny and the hostage were also either dead or unconscious.

I lumbered over to the still form lying on the ground and with great effort placed him behind the steering wheel of my car. It took all my strength. He wasn't a big man, but then neither am I. I traded wallets with him, grabbed the suitcase full of money, and emptied it into the back seat of the station wagon. Luckily there was an old blanket to cover it with.

I put the empty suitcase back into the car, then got behind the steering wheel of the wagon and rested my head on it. I'd fake unconsciousness until the police arrived, then I'd pretend to come to.

It wasn't long before a meaty hand gripped me by the shoulder.

"What happened?" I asked, slowly opening my eyes and shaking my head.

— "Nice try, Weasel," the cop said, "but it's not going to work."

"What are you talking about? My name is. . ."

"Can it, Weasel. I recognize you and I know what you did. You switched I.D.s with the driver of this car and put him in yours. It probably would have worked with another cop, but I'm a twenty-year man and I know my criminals. You guys made quite a haul, I hear."

"Yeah," I answered glumly, "a whole suitcase full. It's still in the car there."

A distant voice hollered something unintelligible. I peered over my shoulder and saw that Big Benny was out of the car. The twenty-year man's partner had him covered.

Big Benny tried to bluff them. "I'm wired with dynamite and I got a hostage!" he yelled.

The old cop laughed.

"You're bluffing, pal. I happen to know how you two birds operate. Now you get over here with your partner or Johnny's going to put a big ugly hole through you."

Big Benny cursed and walked over to the wagon.

"Look and see if there's a suitcase in their car, Johnny—and see if the hostage and that other guy are dead or what."

A minute later the young cop reported, "They're both O.K., I think, Roy—just knocked out. The suitcase is in the back seat."

"You guys want to take off scot free?" the twenty-year man whispered.

"You know it," I said. "What's the catch?"

"Simple—you guys beat it and I keep the money. Just think of me as your silent partner."

"Oh, yeah?" Big Benny challenged. "What about the other cop?"

"Don't you worry none about him. He'll go along with the deal."

"Well, I guess that doesn't leave us much choice," I said. "Get in, Big Benny, and let's see if this heap will still run."

He got in and I started it up. I floored the accelerator and fishtailed the wagon in my hurry to be long gone.

"We got to get rid of this buggy and get us another one as quick as we can," I told Benny.

"What for? That cop ain't gonna squeal on us. He's got the money, ain't he?"

"Nope—we got it. And when he finds out he's gonna be right on our bushy tails. All they got is an empty suitcase."

Big Benny howled with joy and punched me on the arm. "Weasel, you're a genius! Canada, here I come!"

I tooled the wagon speedily into Vegas, where we parked it and left it. We stuffed the money into some old paper sacks, then went to a different casino lot and helped ourselves to another car.

"We'll head for Arizona," I announced, "dump this rig, and catch a flight to Canada. Where in Canada are we going to, anyhow?"

"You mean you're comin' with me?"

I shrugged. "If you don't care. I can't go back to my shoe shop, that's for sure. That cop will have it staked out like a tent."

Big Benny slapped me on the back and started humming. I felt a little like humming too. But our high spirits turned out to be short-lived. The music we were humming to on the radio was interrupted by a news broadcast describing how the two bank robbers escaped with over a hundred thirty thousand in cash and killed a young rookie cop in cold blood while they were doing it.

"What are they talkin' about, Weasel? We never killed nobody. I ain't never killed nobody in my whole life."

"Don't you get it? That old cop killed the young one and blamed it on us. That's what he meant when he said he wouldn't be a problem. It's a good thing the station-wagon driver and the hostage were knocked out or he probably would have blasted them too."

Benny shook his head miserably. "How does he know we won't go back and set things straight?"

I laughed, but there was no humor in it.

"What chance would two bank robbers have against a cop? Who would they believe?"

"His gun—they could check his gun."

"Nope. He'd have used another gun, not his service revolver. And you can bet that's been disposed of."

"He shot that other cop because he thought he was going to get the heist money. I feel sort of like I *am* a murderer now, Weasel."

I reached over and gripped him by the shoulder. "You get that thought out of your head, Big Benny. That cop's no doubt been planning to get his hands on some big dough for quite a spell. If it hadn't been us, it would have been someone else. The results would have been the same."

He was silent for a while. "Well, what now? Do we still hightail it to Canada?"

"We *could* do that—or we could take some action," I said.

"Weasel, you got me completely confused. I thought you said we couldn't do nothin' cause nobody would believe us."

"That's right. Nobody would believe us. But what they would believe is evidence. Cops love hard evidence."

Big Benny frowned. As the oncoming car lights flickered across his oval face he reminded me of the man in the moon. His brain was made of green cheese top. I'd have to spell it out for him.

"Look, what if we sneak back to Vegas, look up the crooked cop's name in the morning papers, then sneak into his house and plant the money? Then we make us a little ol' anonymous phone call to the police and they go out and find the money and arrest old twenty-year-man Roy."

"You mean we can't keep the money?"

"Not if you want to clear our names and give that louse what he deserves. Oh, we can keep a few hundred for plane fare—then we'll go to Canada and do what every straight Joe does. Work. It's up to you, Big Benny. I'll go along with your decision either way."

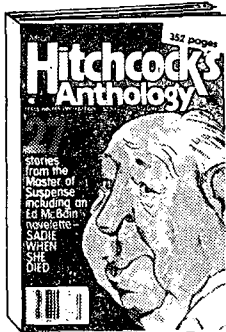
He thought for a brief moment, then made his decision.

"Weasel, turn this heap around. Let's go trap a rat!"

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Inspector Flint was a thorough man, like Alan himself . . .

PORTFOLIO FOR MURDER

by NANCY C. SWOBODA



In a manner of speaking, Alan Belford could have killed himself for being so completely taken in by Sheila—but, instead, he intended to kill *her*: After three years of marriage, a steady insidious outlay of money, and the recent confirmation of his growing apprehensions through an unexpected meeting, he began to formulate his fatal plan.

Alan Belford, an only child, teethered on tickertape and grew up to take over his father's successful brokerage firm. He had gone through life

cautiously and singly till the age of forty-two, when he met Sheila Marler. Despite his sudden rush of passion, he thought he had appraised her thoroughly, as he would any large investment. She readily accepted his proposal of marriage.

They met at the Oakmont Country Club through a mutual friend, Genieve Conway, who had been trying for years to find the perfect princess to fit Alan's glass slipper. His initial impression of Sheila was breathtaking: auburn hair, trim figure, frank green eyes. But it was when she engaged him in an intelligent conversation that Alan began to tumble.

He disliked pretty, empty-headed women who giggled coquettishly and talked about the weather. Sheila jumped right into a discussion of the stock market with a facility that at once kept him on his toes and stimulated him delightfully. Like a foolish schoolboy, he allowed her to occupy his thoughts to the point of distraction—and much to his own surprise, he found himself contemplating marriage.

Genieve Conway chortled gleefully at the intensity of Alan's questioning. "Dear boy, what more can I say than that she's the catch of the year?"

Sheila Marler seemed to be just that—an intelligent, wealthy, childless widow. At his age, he didn't care for the prospect of teenagers disturbing his orderly life, but for the first time he was ready to share it with a wife. All his discreet inquiries served only to reinforce his intention. There was nothing left to do but ask her.

They were an incongruous pair. Alan was tall and thin with saturnine features and the appearance of a prosperous undertaker. Sheila, petite and vivacious, fluttered around him like a brightly colored little bird. The changes in his life came rapidly, but so entranced was he with his bride that he complied willingly and with a new sense of recklessness.

Naturally he had to give up his spartan quarters at the Men's Club. They bought a small but elegant house close enough to Alan's office so he could walk to work if he chose. In lieu of his daily morning workout at the club, this seemed a satisfactory concession. Next came a three-week honeymoon cruise to the West Indies, followed by Alan's relinquishing his perfectly respectable blue sedan for a silver Mercedes.

The first two years of their marriage were a kaleidoscope of parties, romance, and redecorating. Toward the end of that time he found himself struggling for a semblance of routine. He grew tired of the constant

entertaining, the ever-changing decor of their home. Like a diver fighting the euphoria of the deep, he had to come up for air to survive.

He came home from work one evening to find Sheila peering through a rolled-up magazine at some wallpaper samples she had tacked to the dining-room wall.

"What on earth are you doing?" He put down his briefcase and went to where she stood.

"Just a little decorator's trick, darling. One can get a better perspective."

"Of what?"

"How the new paper will look, of course," she said indulgently.

"What's wrong with the paper we have? It's barely two years old."

"I know, dear, but murals are passé—and I'm sure our guests are as tired of looking at that same old scene as I am."

And I'm tired of looking at the same old guests, he thought. He looked into her green eyes and seeing defiance threatening, something made him deliberately want to roil the waters, to know what lay beneath the placid surface of their marriage.

"Sheila, you are not going to touch this room." He strode over and ripped the samples off the wall.

"Alan! What's gotten into you?"

"I've indulged you, Sheila, in everything. I've been pliable, I think. I've certainly enjoyed this new life, but it's time to settle down. I need routine."

The green eyes flared briefly and then wisely softened. "Oh, my poor dear. You're right. I keep forgetting I married a sedentary old bachelor." She put her arm around his waist. "We'll just have to moderate."

Her words pleased him, but the arm he in turn slipped around her waist felt a tense resistance.

A silent undercurrent began then. Sheila *did* moderate her behavior in the obvious things that upset Alan. But she continued to overspend on clothes, jewelry, small *objets d'art*. He was stunned at the amounts that literally evaporated from their account. He had always enjoyed a feeling of security in the ready funds he had carefully nurtured. Now they were picked clean with alarming regularity.

Many times he had tactfully broached the subject of her holdings. His first concern was for her to have her name changed on any stock portfolios she had. He suggested she transfer her assets to Oakmont for closer

scrutiny and offered to advise her on investments. He had readily accepted her initial response:

"I hope you'll understand—and be impressed, Alan dear. I've already notified my broker of my new name."

"Oh? Is he a local man?"

"No, sweetheart, it's the same man who took care of my late husband's affairs. He's done so well by me in the past that I think it best to leave everything with him."

Later he began probing more deeply. "As your husband, I feel a responsibility to oversee your holdings, Sheila. At least let me run a check on your broker. What's his name?"

She hedged. "Now, Alan, would *you* appreciate being investigated by one of your peers?"

"Since my integrity is beyond question, I'd welcome it."

"Of course you would, dear. But my broker wouldn't. He's very temperamental—very sensitive to trends, particularly to people's reactions. He's sniffed out some very profitable investments that way."

"All right. You've made your point," he conceded. But it would be easy, he mused, to call New York and find out the name of the late Edward Marler's broker. The status of Sheila's finances had become a matter of prime importance to him.

But once he located the man, his determination wavered. What if Sheila's broker told her about his inquiries or took offense at his prying? It could cause a serious breach in their marriage. However, his resolution returned. A carefully phrased call couldn't really hurt. He had the call put through.

"Mr. Waverly, this is Alan Belford, Sheila Marler's husband."

"Oh, yes, Mr. Belford?"

"I called to introduce myself. Sheila's told me you're handling her portfolio."

"Really?"

"Yes. I thought I should let you know I'm also a broker." He inserted a friendly laugh. "Sheila's informed me she's very happy with your services."

"But, Mr. Belford—"

"Please don't take offense, Mr. Waverly. I think it's a wise arrangement. Brokers are rather like doctors—we shouldn't practice on our own families."

"Excuse me, Mr. Belford, but Mrs. Marler—er, Mrs. Belford—doesn't have any holdings with me."

"Oh? Well, perhaps someone else in your firm?"

"No. I did take care of Mr. Marler's affairs, but everything's been liquidated."

"I see. Thank you very much, Mr. Waverly. Obviously there's been a misunderstanding on my part. I'm very sorry to have troubled you."

"Not at all, Mr. Belford. I'm glad you called. Let me know if I can be of any further assistance."

So Sheila had lied to him. The expensive trappings had been a façade. Chances were that she didn't have a penny to her name. If she'd been honest with him in the beginning it wouldn't have mattered. But her pretense of wealth combined with her fanatic spending gave him the sickening feeling that he was being had, and seriously.

The direct approach was part of his nature. He faced her over cocktails that evening. Her green eyes flew open in shock. "You actually *called* Jonathan Waverly?"

"Yes," Alan said flatly.

"You were checking up on me!"

"For my own peace of mind."

"Your peace of mind! What about *my* integrity?" Her hand was shaking as she paused to take a large drink of her martini. "For your information, I closed out my portfolio with Mr. Waverly in order to put everything into a savings account. Don't I have the right to do as I wish with my own funds?"

"Most assuredly. But why did you decide to do that? With your knowledge of finances, I'm surprised that you'd opt for that kind of low-interest return." He studied her intently.

She had recovered from her initial surprise. Her voice was calm again. "I should have told you, darling. My portfolio wasn't that impressive. I decided shortly after you and I discussed it that it was silly to trouble Mr. Waverly any further. A savings account is much more accessible for such personal expenses as I'm likely to have."

Her sudden contrition puzzled him and made him suspicious. Dare he press her further by asking where she'd invested her savings? He considered his conversation with Jonathan Waverly. Perhaps the broker simply chose not to reveal any details of his affiliation with Sheila. What she said could be true—she could have closed out her account. If he hadn't

been so shocked by Waverly's response, he would have questioned him in more detail. For the time being, he elected to accept her explanation. Her desirability was still a strong factor in his decision.

After that there was an atmosphere of watchfulness and caution between them. With some regret Alan felt the recklessness, the unbridled passion, give way to his old control. He felt safer in control and hoped that Sheila would conform, yet still be as loving and indulgent.

And for a time, she was. And Alan relaxed and once again enjoyed his marriage. Sheila befriended their next-door neighbor, Doris Manion, and took to having coffee with her during the day. They traded recipes and, much to Alan's delight, he and Sheila spent more evenings at home over intimate dinners. But then, slowly, he felt himself being maneuvered back into Sheila's lavish spending and entertaining.

He wasn't stupid. It was painfully clear to him that Sheila had married him for his money. Spending it was to her like liquor was to an alcoholic. And his protestations, both subtle and patent, eventually caused the change in her that he feared. She became cold, withdrawn, and blatant in her refusals to curtail her expensive buying sprees.

Then a brokers' convention in New York provided him with temporary escape from the strain between them.

He was having a nightcap at the bar after a long seminar and a late dinner when he felt someone touch his sleeve.

"Mr. Belford?" said a thin, grey-haired man.

"Yes, I'm Alan Belford."

"I'm Jonathan Waverly. You phoned me some time ago regarding your wife."

"Yes, of course. Sit down. Let me buy you a drink."

Hesitantly, the man settled himself on the stool next to Alan. "I spotted you at the meeting today and hoped you wouldn't mind if I approached you."

"I'm glad you did, Mr. Waverly."

"Mr. Belford, there's a question of professional confidence on my mind. Would you let me tell you as much of it as I can?"

"Please do."

Waverly tossed down his drink and spoke rapidly. "Be careful, Mr. Belford. Your wife almost ruined her late husband. When he died, there

was very little left to pay off their debts. Fortunately he had funds in trust for his son and she couldn't touch those."

Alan sighed and said nothing.

"From your phone call that day I knew there must be similar trouble." He rose. "I'm very sorry to be the cause of distress."

Alan shook his head. "I'm grateful for your concern," he said. "Thank you for telling me."

This time when he confronted her, Sheila registered no surprise. The expression in her green eyes and the smirk on her mouth reminded him of a cat that had just cornered a mouse.

"A divorce? Oh, dear, foolish Alan. On what grounds? I haven't been unfaithful. On the contrary, I've been the perfect wife."

"The perfect spender—the classic gold-digger," he said bitterly.

"What woman doesn't marry for security? No, my dear, *you'll* receive no divorce from *me*."

And she laughed a smug little laugh.

She was right. He could get a divorce—on the ground of irreconcilable differences or the like—but it would cost him heavily. The fact that after all of his years of caution and comfort he had been duped into this position panicked and enraged him.

One evening Sheila handed him a perfectly mixed martini, perched on the arm of his chair, and smiled down at him.

"Your sullen manner will never do, Alan. You were terribly rude to Doris this afternoon."

"She's over here all the time, and she's the neighborhood gossip. I don't like it."

"Oh, but think how you've enjoyed her recipes, dear." She leaned closer. "I know Doris has a vicious tongue. Just *think* of the things I could tell her about you. Your position as a broker is very fragile, Alan, and I know just what I could tell her that would ruin your reputation. Of course, if things run smoothly in our little nest, I wouldn't have to say anything though, would I?"

It was a simple idea. As carefully as he would build a stock portfolio, Alan researched, utilized available assets, and put his plan into action. His first investment was Doris. When Sheila was out on one of her buying binges, he went next door.

"Doris, forgive my boorish manners lately. I'm—well, I'm worried about Sheila."

- "Oh?" Doris warmed to the potential bit of dirt.

"To you she may seem all right—busy, happy. But she's not. She has terrible fits of depression."

"Not Sheila!"

"Oh, yes. Outwardly, she's in control, energetic. But she's living on nerves. I never know what to expect; I can't imagine what's bothering her. I've suggested a psychiatrist, but she won't hear of it."

Doris reflected. "Well, I *have* always thought of her as a very hyper person."

Quietly, he confided his worry about Sheila to all their friends. Doris, he knew, was doing the same, with embellishments. Once the suggestion was planted, Sheila's normally animated social behavior could easily be misconstrued. He enjoyed observing their friends watch her and measure what she said and did.

His next venture was to establish a definite work pattern. He began working late several nights a week. Dutifully he would call and make his excuses to Sheila, especially when he knew Doris would be there. During his late hours at the office he found he could tape open the lock on the rear exit door and re-enter at will. He had to sign out with the night watchman in the building, which was fine with him. Walking to work was the norm. He had started doing it regularly while Sheila cruised around town in the Mercedes.

Then one morning he was ready.

As he left the house, she looked vulnerable and girlish in her slacks and blouse, her auburn hair loose and shining. Don't be taken in again, he admonished himself, and hurried down the walk.

He called her around four in the afternoon to tell her he'd be working late and not to wait dinner.

"All right," she said. "Doris and her son are here, and we've just finished a big pizza. No problem."

Perfect! Doris's son Paul often came over to mow the lawn or clean out the garage for pocket money. Another witness wouldn't hurt.

He actually did some work. It kept his mind off what he was about to do when it turned dark.

As soon as the street lights went on, he slipped out the back exit, taped it open, and walked through the shadowy streets to the back door of his

house. He could see Sheila sitting alone at the kitchen table having a drink as she read the evening paper.

In his pocket was a small bottle of ether he had stolen from the pharmacy several days earlier. It had been so easy—dropping in to give Jeb Ryan, the pharmacist, a tip on the market, waiting for him in the stockroom while Jeb finished filling a prescription out front. He soaked a handkerchief with it and quietly let himself in.

The radio was playing and Sheila didn't hear him. He pressed the cloth to her face until she went limp. Then he carried her out to the garage and placed her behind the wheel of the gleaming Mercedes.

Back in the kitchen, he put his house keys on the hook and took her car keys out to the garage. He pressed her fingers around the key and inserted it in the ignition, then opened all the car windows from the master control with Sheila's other limp hand. The exhaust built up rapidly. He waited until the small enclosure was engulfed in the noxious grey cloud, felt his way along the car to the connecting door to the kitchen, went in, and hurriedly closed it behind him. He slipped out the back door into the darkness, made sure the lock caught, and took a deep breath of the fresh, cool air. His return to the office went smoothly. He stripped the tape off the exit door and went to the men's room, where he flushed the tape and ether down the toilet, then tossed the container and the handkerchief down the incinerator chute in the hall.

He waited an hour before he allowed himself to call the house. There was no answer. Then he called Doris.

"Is Sheila with you?" he asked with some alarm. "This is Alan."

"No. I left her at your house. Why?"

"I'm at the office. I left my house keys at home. It's so late I wanted her to know it will be me at the door—not an intruder trying to get in."

"The lights are on. She didn't mention anything about going out."

"Would you mind checking on her? I'll wait. Frankly, I'm a little worried. You know, because of her depression. But I know that's silly. She's probably just in the shower."

"It's not a bit silly. Hold on, Alan. I'll run over and see."

He heard her put down the phone. Good old Doris. In less time than he expected he heard her scream, her running footsteps, her fumbling for the phone. "My God, Alan!" she cried. "Hang up and come quick! I have to call the rescue squad!"

"Doris! What's happened?"

The response was the hum of a disconnect. He wasted no time leaving the office and assumed an expression of great agitation when he encountered the guard in the lobby, sitting at a small desk inside the entrance. "Is something wrong, Mr. Belford?"

"I'm afraid there may be. My wife—our neighbor has called the rescue squad." He looked outside. "Oh, lord, there's no cab at the stand!"

The guard turned the key in the lock. "Mr. Belford, you can get a cab in a second—use the call box there."

By the time he arrived home they had taken Sheila's body away. The red lights from a police car bounced off the shining surface of the Mercedes, now standing benignly in the open garage. Doris, two policemen, and some neighbors were standing on the front lawn. Now that the deed was done he was genuinely frightened. Pale and trembling, he got out of the cab. Doris rushed over to him.

"Oh, Alan!"

She took his arm and led him in the front door and back to his kitchen. "You need a drink," she said.

The two officers followed and stood until he had settled himself in a chair before one of them spoke to him. "Mr. Belford, it appears that your wife committed suicide. I'm sorry but we'll have to ask you a few questions. An inspector will be along soon."

"How did it happen?"

"The car. Carbon-monoxide fumes."

As Doris brought him a large whiskey, the inspector, a sharp-eyed man named Flint, arrived. He talked briefly with the officers, glanced at Alan, and then spoke to Doris.

"If you'll just step outside with me, Mrs. Manion—you're the one who found Mrs. Belford, aren't you? I'd like to ask you a few questions while Mr. Belford pulls himself together."

They weren't gone for long when the inspector returned and sat opposite Alan at the table. The policemen remained on their feet.

Yes, Alan replied, he had left for work around nine that morning and hadn't returned until after Sheila's body had been found. Yes, his wife had been fighting depression. No, she hadn't been physically ill. Yes, they had gotten on well.

"And you called home because you forgot your house keys and there was no answer?"

"Yes. That's when I called Mrs. Manion—"

"Do-you remember where you left your house keys, Mr. Belford?"

"I suppose I must have left them on the key caddy by the door there."

He turned. "Yes, there they are."

The inspector nodded. "I think that'll be all for now, Mr. Belford. Thank you." He turned to the policemen. "Radio for a crew to go over the car and the garage. Meanwhile, keep it sealed off."

They were in the garage for a very long time, it seemed to Alan. He reviewed what he had done there. Fingerprints? They both used the car, and the only recent prints that mattered were Sheila's, on the ignition and window buttons. Ether? That should have been expended and replaced by the carbon monoxide in her lungs.

He told himself to relax. Inspector Flint was simply a thorough man and, after all, the Belford name was prominent in Oakmont. Alan would take the same precautions, given his position. Caution was something he admired and intended to exercise in the future. No other woman would ever take him as Sheila had done.

When Inspector Flint returned some minutes later his voice was cooler, lacking the sympathy it had held before. "You stated that you were absent from this house from the time you left for work until the time you arrived in the cab?"

"That's correct. The guard at my building will vouch for that."

"We've checked with the guard. That is his impression. Now, according to witnesses, you did not enter the garage after your arrival. Mrs. Manion and the two officers state that you came directly to the kitchen."

Alan nodded.

The inspector eyed him. "It would have worked if *you'd* found your wife's body, Mr. Belford."

"What? What do you mean by that?" Alan jumped up.

"Sit down," snapped the inspector. "When I questioned Mrs. Manion earlier, she told me something very interesting—a circumstance you obviously knew nothing about."

"Whatever it is it's undoubtedly a lie," Alan said defensively.

"I don't think so, Mr. Belford. Her son verified it. You see, while Mrs. Manion was over here having coffee with your wife after lunch today, her son washed and waxed your car."

"What's so unusual about that?"

"Normally both your wife's and your fingerprints would be on the exterior of the car. But you had no way of knowing the Mercedes had been wiped clean this afternoon."

The truth was beginning to dawn on Alan. He felt himself growing faint. Stupid, stupid! Why hadn't he worn gloves? His shoulders sagged in resignation. "Go on, Inspector."

"The car's been dusted for prints. We've found only yours on the exterior. None of your wife's. I think we both know why that's so, don't we, Mr. Belford?"

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The amusement-park gunfights were a perfect setup for murder . . .

THE AFTERNOON BLOOD SHOW

by JIM BEAVER



One thing I admired about Alan Lucas was the way he always managed to look better than anyone around him. Even now his was better-looking than any of the faces nearby, despite the fact that he was deader than last week's lettuce.

A bunch of us stood there, staring at the slick red splotch across Alan's grey-blue shirt. He lay on his back, drooped over the hood of a rusty old bumper car out back of the Last Chance Saloon, his holster empty. I saw

his .44 Ruger a few feet off, next to the wrecked hulk of an old ferris-wheel seat. His wide-brimmed beaver with the beaded hatband was squashed under his left boot. I didn't notice much else right then. Least, not as much as a P.I. oughta.

There was a lot of commotion, not to mention emotion, in the next few minutes. I liked Alan as much as any of these guys, and I was sure tore up to see him lying there like one of them bloody dummies they showed us in Marine Corps First Aid lectures. But I figured somebody oughta take charge and start finding out who done this. What was eating me was the sure feeling that it was one of us.

"Us" is a bunch of cowboy-types who do gunfight shows for the tourists at Six-Gun City, an Old West amusement park just off the Turner Turnpike, between Tulsa and Oklahoma City. The pay ain't much—most of us do it just because it's more fun than going fishing, I guess. My name's Rick Muldoon. I'm not a regular at the park, haven't been since that year of college I took. I've got a near-bust investigator's office down in Dallas. I come up three or four times a year to do a few park shows and see my pals. And because I still get a kick out of playing cowboy. I try not to make too many excuses about that.

There was some flies around and some of the fellows wanted to move Alan's body inside somewhere. I put a stop to the jabber and sent Shorty Dugan to the park office. "Get on the phone to the local cop shop, tell 'em who you are, what's happened, and where. Then you better send Harold down here."

Shorty grinned, not out of lack of feeling, but because he ain't got no teeth in front. "What about a doctor or somethin'?"

"A doctor won't do no good now. You just tell the law we got a homicide. They'll take care of the 'or something.'"

Shorty skedaddled. I sent the other gunfighters back to the marshal's office and told them to lock up their guns in the safe and wait there.

Slim Parker, all five-foot-twenty of him, dawdled and asked, "How come we gotta lock up the guns?" He sounded a bit touchy.

"'Cause it's likely one of our guns did it. I'd just like to know where they are."

"Why ain't you goin'?"

"And leave ol' Alan out here all by hisself? Unh-uh."

Slim snorted. "Guardin' the evidence, huh? Well, who's gonna guard you—and your gun?"

I stared up at Slim a moment, then said, "Fair enough. When Harold gets here, you take my gun and yours and lock 'em up, then come back here and we'll wait for the police together. O.K.?"

Harold Szeluga walked into the Last Chance just then, picking his way over loose lumber and through the open back wall into the grassy storage area where Alan lay. Slim mumbled something, took my .357 Hawes, and left. Harold swore as a loose nail caught his knit shirt with the gator on it, then stopped dead as he saw the corpse.

"Oh, God," he moaned, clapping his hands on either side of his chrome-dome. "He's not dead, is he? They told me somebody got shot, but I thought it was just another of those blank wounds. Oh, my God."

I didn't really want to deal with this malarkey, so I quickly told Harold what I knew to shut him up. Then I hit him where he lived. I told him he'd have to close the park for the rest of the day.

"Close the park? Clear all these people out? I can't do that. I'd have to give refunds! And who are you, telling me what to do?"

"I'm not on your regular crew any more. I'm a private investigator, and I know what I'm talking about. You don't have to close the park on my say-so, but you'll have to do it on the police's. Besides, that way you can keep this thing quiet. You want a panic on your hands?" Harold being a panicky kind of guy himself, I figured that'd get him. It did.

"No, no, you're right. We can't afford a panic. But won't we be sending the killer out with the crowds?"

"No." I explained how I thought the murderer was probably someone on the gunfight crew. "And anyway, if it was a paying guest done it, he's long gone by now. But no gunfighter can leave without arousing suspicion. Either way, we're better off with the park closed. Just hang on to the other employees, and—oh, yeah—any girl friends or other visitors with personal connections."

Harold bristled. "Employees can't have visitors during working hours."

I smiled. "Yeah, well, I see a few ever' now and then."

He looked at me hard, like he'd just noticed my face. "Who are you?"

"Name's Muldoon. I was a regular here for about five years."

"Oh, yeah? And you're a freebie now?"

"Yep. Just visiting. Don't worry, you're not paying me."

Harold squinted at me. "Good," he said, and made his way back out through the false front. He never got around to a second look at the dead man beside me.

Slim came back and we waited, not talking. I knelt for a closer look at the body.

Slim asked what I was doing, but I didn't answer and he didn't ask again.

The wound was a good-size one, probably a .44 or .45, though a .357 magnum could have done it. That covered almost every weapon in the park except shotguns. This weren't no shotgun. The bullet had entered the upper abdomen just below the left ribs. Lifting gently on the body, so not to disturb nothing, I slid my hand under and found the exit wound in Alan's back. The blood there was brown and crusty, almost dry. I lowered the body and touched the entry wound. Gingerly. I ain't crazy about that kind of thing. My finger came away red and gummy, as if I'd dipped it into rubber cement.

I checked Alan's pockets, at least the ones I could get to without moving him. His tan vest was flopped open on either side. There was a notch out of the left flap where the bullet had ripped through. The vest pockets contained only a few empty shell casings and a couple of .44 blanks—normal gunfighter stuff. In Alan's shirt-breast pocket I found one of the blood packs we use for special effects. It was unbroken, and I returned it to the pocket.

I stood up, then realized Alan's eyes were still open. One of them jobs everybody figgers somebody else'll do. I closed them, wondering what a couple of hours staring at the sun like that would do to a pair of eyes. I turned away, then had a second thought. I hunkered down again by the body and undid a couple of shirt buttons. Pulling lightly on the fabric so not to affect the wound, I peeked under the shirt at Alan's torso. Sure enough, there was a strip of adhesive tape running across the bottom ribs.

"Find somethin'?"

I turned and looked at Slim's hawk-face.

"Nothing unusual," I answered, and rebuttoned the shirt. As I finished, I heard the sirens.

We were lucky with the sheriff. He wasn't one of them loud, obnoxious lawmen that sprout up in Oklahoma like goatheads in a unmowed lawn. His name was Sharp, but he didn't look too sharp to me. I don't mean dumb, just round. Everywhere lanky folks like me or Slim had angles he was just one big curve, like a cotton boll with legs. His face was pudgy

too, with little wisps of grey hair around the edges of his Stetson, and thin glasses he seemed to take off whenever he wanted to see something. He looked like Santa Claus in a sheriff suit.

We talked out front, and he seemed a nice enough fellow, even after I explained how he'd never be able to solve this case without my expert knowledge of amusement-park gunfighting. He didn't even have no quarrel with my out-of-state P.I. license and buzzer. Just smiled and said, "Glad to have you." I decided he could probably be meaner than a suitcase full of bobcats.

I led Sharp into the Last Chance and out through where the back wall should have been. He looked over the area, knee-deep in grass and discarded park equipment, then picked up Alan's gun lightly with a handkerchief. Locking a handcuff ring through the trigger-guard, Sharp let the weapon dangle at his side. I picked up Alan's hat and Sharp bent for his first good look at the body. I told him what I'd found, but he looked anyway. Then he beckoned to me.

"Lookie here, Slick. He's got powder flakes imbedded in his shirt."

I knelt and picked at a speck of the unburnt powder. "That don't mean much around here, Sheriff. Happens all the time. We try never to aim directly at anybody, but you still catch a little spray now and then if you're within twenty feet of somebody shooting. See, I've got the same thing." I brushed my shirt hard and collected the speckles as they fell.

Sharp took off his glasses and peered at the powder in my hand. "I guess so. What kinda powder you boys use?"

"Mostly plain ol' black powder, with a little Red Dot mixed in."

"So you do all your own loadin'?"

"Have to. Can't afford store-bought blanks, not using fifty-sixty rounds a show, ten shows a day."

"Uh-hunh." Sharp took a few more minutes looking over the area, then let the ambulance boys in. We went back out on the street.

"You're not gonna photograph the body?" I asked.

The sheriff spat. "With what? I ain't got no camera."

I was prepared to let it go at that, but Sharp continued. "Wetoka's a small town, son. We ain't got no crime lab or photographers or fingerprint men. I got a good memory though. We'll let the coroner take a look at him. He might tell us somethin'. Tell us the boy's dead, more'n likely."

I started to lead Sheriff Sharp up to the marshal's office to talk to the crew, but he wanted to see how the buildings are laid out.

There are two main gunfight streets in Six-Gun City. The Last Chance Saloon is on Fort Street, about midway down. Like most buildings on gunfight streets, the Last Chance is a false front. Outside, it looks like a typical western saloon, but inside there's mostly nothing. Room enough for six-seven guys to stand out of sight, and enough back wall to give the impression of, well, a back wall—at least looking straight in the door. But once you get past the doorway, off to the side, the back wall opens up onto the storage area. Nearly every building on Fort Street's south side opens onto this compound, though there's no public access, due to the false fronts being locked between shows.

The Last Chance is the only two-story building on the street. The saloon itself takes up only the ground floor, while the second story houses Madame LaRue's Social Club. Facing the building, you see LaRue's door at the left end of the building's face, the saloon door at the right end. A balcony runs the length of LaRue's, directly above the board sidewalk in front of the saloon. A staircase with rickets leads from LaRue's door down to the street edge of the boardwalk, jutting out from the false front like the hawk nose on Slim Parker's face.

LaRue's, of course, is also a false front, with a bit of room to stand inside, but not much. For some reason, its back wall has an opening directly behind the doorway. Since anybody looking through the door from the audience can see there's no back wall, somebody hung a tarp there so's it'd look a little like a room with walls to it.

I climbed the stairs with Sharp and we stood on Madame LaRue's balcony while I explained how our shows work. It didn't take long.

"Where's the audience stand durin' these shoot-em-ups?" the sheriff asked.

"Across the street there, on the north boardwalk. We do the shows on the south boardwalk beneath us here, and in the street."

"And up here?"

"Yes, sir, sometimes."

Sharp stepped into LaRue's and looked about the small space, which was maybe three by eight. Then he pulled the tarp aside and studied the grassy arena below. The bumper car hulk where Alan had died was directly beneath the wall opening. From where we stood, the blood didn't show against the rust.

Sharp peered at the ground, then turned to me. "How many guys you got on this gunfight crew?"

"Fifteen or twenty, I reckon. Only about eight or ten workin' today."

"And they've all got guns?"

"Yep. Most of 'em got two or three."

"Terrific. Any of 'em licensed?"

"I doubt it. Not in Oklahoma, not if they don't have to. But I had 'em lock up all the weapons till you got here."

"Well, that's something. O.K.," he said, and started down the stairs.

"Let's go talk to them. Where you got 'em corralled?"

"They're all over at the marshal's office," I said, following him down the shaky steps.

"Marshal's office? Who's the marshal?"

Outside the chain-link park fence, I could see the ambulance pulling onto the turnpike. I nodded in that direction. "That's him they just carted off."

The marshal's office was on Mine Street but, unlike the other buildings, it was functional. There was a tiny office papered in wanted posters up front for the tourists, but a door disguised as a rifle case led into the larger back room. Here the gunfighters rested between shows, loaded blanks, and stored their gear. Extra guns, blood packs, and spare costumes were stashed here too. I led Sheriff Sharp into the room, which was already crowded and hot, even for July. You could say there was a hubbub going on.

"When the hell we gonna find somethin' out, Muldoon? We been waitin' more'n half an hour." That was Slim. Figgered.

I got everybody to shut up, then checked to see that the whole crew was present. They was, along with Alan's wife, Candy, who used to work at the park and now come by near about as often as Alan. She sat at the back of the room, looking mighty tearful. Roz Kelly, one of the two female crew members, had an arm around her, comforting-like. The other woman on the team, Terri McKenzie, stood off to one side, down in the mouth. 'Bout like everybody else.

"Where's Harold?" I asked.

Pinky Edwards, a smiling cowboy with John Wayne's body and Baby LeRoy's face, answered.

"He said he'd be at the park office if ya needed him. He was gettin' pretty bent about havin' to close the park."

"Well, let him bend," I said. "He'll straighten out once we get this

thing took care of. Now, this here's Sheriff Sharp, from Wetoka. He's running this show. He's agreed to let me help out since he don't know the routine here. I'll let him take it from here."

Sharp took off his specs and gave a long hard look at the crowd of faces. By the time he'd eyeballed everybody, it'd gotten real quiet.

"O.K.," he began. "I'm gonna start by askin' some general questions, then I'll want to speak with each of you privately. Now, who found the body?"

"I did." It was Shorty Dugan.

"What time was it?"

Shorty wrinkled his bashed-in nose. "Just after three o'clock, I guess. We was right in the middle of the three o'clock show."

"And how'd you happen to find him, uh, what's your name?"

"Ronald Dugan, sir. They call me Shorty. Well, we was doin' a runnin' gun battle on Fort Street, 'cause we'd got started late and didn't have time to think up a good plot. The baddies just run in one end of the street, with the law chasin' 'em. Ever'body goes for cover and just starts shootin'."

"Just a second, Shorty. Was Alan Lucas in this gunfight?"

"No, sir. He didn't show up for the three o'clock. That's why we was late. He usually plans the shows."

Sharp replaced his glasses. "All right. Go on."

"Well, sir, at first I hid out behind the wagon there in the middle of the street. Then I decided to make a run for the Last Chance. I ran inside the door, and there he was, lyin' in the back yard on that bumper car."

"Did you go to him?"

"Yes, sir, and that's when I seen the bullet hole."

"Did you touch the body?"

"I was afraid to. No, sir."

The sheriff smiled. "No need to call me sir, son. O.K., what then?"

"Well, sir, I mean—well, I called out to the marshal and he ended the show real quick, and then ever'body—"

"Hold up, son. You called out to the marshal? I thought this Lucas was the marshal."

I stood up from the crate I'd been sitting on. "Alan was the gunfighter marshal, Sheriff. That was his job, sorta like general manager. Didn't have nothing to do with who plays the marshal in the actual shows. That changes all the time."

Sharp bit on his lower lip. "I see. And who played the marshal in this show?"

"Me." Pinky Edwards had his hand up. "I heard Shorty yellin' 'Coffeyville,' and I knew something was wrong, so I ended the show quick as I could."

"'Coffeyville' is a code word, Sheriff," I interrupted. "Means a foul-up of some kind and to get the show over with. When someone yells 'Coffeyville,' all the bad guys are s'posed to step out from cover and get shot right then, so the show'll be over without the crowd knowing anything's wrong."

"I understand. Then, Muldoon, you took over and called the police?"

"That's right. Nobody touched him but me till you got here."

Sharp grunted, then took off his glasses and looked around the room. "Anybody else go in the Last Chance? Before Shorty, I mean."

No one spoke.

"O.K. then, let's find out who saw young Mr. Lucas last. Alive, that is. Now, Shorty, you say Lucas didn't show up for the three o'clock gunfight. Did he show up for the one before that? When would that have been?"

"One o'clock," I said. "We have shows every two hours, starting at eleven A.M."

"One o'clock. That was the blood show," Shorty said slowly.

"He was there," Slim said.

"Yeah, he was there," added Jeremy Spear. Spear hadn't said much so far, just stood in the corner scratching and dribbling Ritz cracker crumbs in his beard. Like usual.

Sheriff Sharp turned to me. "What's this blood show Shorty mentioned?"

"We do a couple of blood shows ever' weekend," I explained. "Most of our gunfights are clean, no blood, just take a hit and go down. But on weekends, when the crowds are bigger, we do a lot of special effects. Bullet splinters in the walls, breakaway glass, maybe a hanging, that sort of thing. For these shows, we build blood packs and strap 'em on and break 'em during the show. They make a pretty realistic gunshot wound. See, here." I pointed to a cigar box full of spare blood packs on the loading bench. "Just waffle syrup, food coloring, and plastic bags."

"You boys do this for a livin', huh?" Sharp's voice seemed to have picked up a slight edge.

"Some of us. Anyway, it's fun."

"Some fun."

The sheriff looked about for a chair, but finally just hiked a leg up on the loading bench. "So. All of you were in this one o'clock blood show?"

"Not me," I said. "I went to lunch in Wetoka 'bout noon and didn't get back in time."

"But," Sharp continued, "the rest of you agree Alan Lucas was in that show."

Nods.

"Good. Then the murder took place between the one o'clock and three o'clock shows—at least, before the end of the three o'clock. Did anyone see Lucas between the two shows?"

Shorty Dugan spoke up. "I did."

"When?"

"Oh, one-thirty, maybe two o'clock. I was goin' to my car for some gun oil. I seen him sittin' in his car down by the gate."

"Did you speak to him?"

"Naw. I was halfway across the parkin' lot. I seen him though."

Jeremy Spear sent his empty Ritz cracker box looping across the room into a trash can. "I think I saw him too, come to think of it. Seems like I saw him out back of the marshal's office when I was cleanin' up after the blood show."

Sharp pulled off those glasses again. "When was this?"

Spear smiled. "Oh, couldn't a been more'n one-twenty or so. I came straight back after the show, to wash the blood off me."

Then it hit me. I deserved a Spanish-toe boot in the rump for not catching this one sooner. "Sheriff, can I talk to you for a second?"

We pulled halfway through the door into the phony marshal's office up front.

"Whatcha got, Slick?"

"Sheriff," I whispered, "them boys didn't see Alan anytime after that blood show."

"How you figger that?"

"What Spear said about washin' up after the show. First thing a gun-fighter does after a blood show is head out back here and wash that phony blood off. Alan wouldn't have gone out to the parking lot or anywhere else without washing that stuff off first."

"So?"

"So this. When I looked at Alan's body, the blood at the exit wound had pretty well dried, but the entry wound was still wet."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. You didn't touch that stuff. I did. The wet stuff on the front of that shirt wasn't real blood, it was the phony waffle-syrup blood. That gunk takes forever to dry. And if that's not enough for you, Alan still had the adhesive tape for the blood pack on his stomach. And he had an unbroken pack in his shirt pocket."

"Which means—"

"Which means that somebody killed him during the blood show, or immediately after it. Anybody who says he saw him later than that has either lied or he's made a big mistake."

Sheriff Sharp wiped the sweat from behind his left ear. "Could be he's done both."

After a few more questions that didn't lead to much, Sharp seemed ready to get on with the individual questioning. Harold Szeluga came in like he owned the place, which, of course, he did. He looked like he had something to say, but he didn't speak, just stood off to the side and watched.

Without making it seem important, Sheriff Sharp said, "Just outa curiosity, I'd like to know where everybody was during this blood show."

Pinky Edwards said, "I think I can tell you that, Sheriff. I was the marshal in that show. It was a simple water-rights show, with 'most ever'body out in the street. Slim and Montana here were my deputies. Terri was the owner of the ranch Alan was divertin' water from. We came into town to face him down."

"Where were you exactly?"

"At first we were out in the street, right in front of the Last Chance. There's two wagons in the street, and when the shootin' started we went for cover behind them."

"Where was Alan?"

"He was upstairs in LaRue's, above the Last Chance. His gang was downstairs in the saloon with Roz, except for Shorty and Spear. They was out front on the boardwalk."

"These wagons. Do you have a clear view of the balcony from behind 'em?"

Pinky hesitated a second, then answered, "Yeah, sure. They're pretty

far out in the street. One's right in front of the Cattlemen's and the other's at the opposite end of the saloon, near the foot of LaRue's stairs. You can see the whole front of the building from either one."

Sharp was quiet for a bit, frowning into the floor and picking at his thumbnail. Finally he said, "All right. I'll want to see each of you, one at a time, out in the front office. No need for the rest of you to stay cooped up in here, but don't nobody stray too far." Sharp made a move to turn, but stopped. "I'm presumin' that ever'body was in on this show, that no one was layin' out. Right?"

Pinky spoke again. "Ever'body was in it, Sheriff. Except for Candy there, of course. She's Alan's wife."

"His wife? Well, Judas! Why didn't someone tell me?" Sharp made his way back to where Candy sat. "I'm sorry, Miz Lucas. I'll try and get through this as quick as I can."

Candy nodded but didn't say nothing.

The sheriff took a step, then turned around. "Oh, Miz Lucas. You mind if I ask where you was durin' this show?"

Candy looked at him, then at Harold, then at the floor. "I was out front on the boardwalk, watchin' the show."

"Across the street from the saloon?"

Candy nodded.

Sharp grunted. "O.K. then, let's get to it. Pinky, is it? I'd like to see you first. Give me a minute with Mr. Muldoon here, then we'll call you in."

It wasn't quite as sweltering in the little marshal's office out front, but I still had sweat in my moustache. The open door shifted slightly in a breeze that wasn't there, and the street outside looked Twilight Zoney, being as it was empty at four-thirty on a Saturday afternoon. The only sounds were trucks out on the Turner Turnpike and an occasional voice from out back.

Sheriff Sharp sat behind a midget desk in one corner of the tiny room, doodling on a Dalton gang poster while I leaned on the corner of the rolltop desk opposite. Sharp took off his hat and ran fingers through his hair.

"They teach you about motive, means, and opportunity down there in Texas?"

"A little," I said, "and I watch a lot of *Perry Mason* reruns."

Sharp chuckled. "That oughta do it. Well, Slick, it appears to me we got plenty of means and plenty of opportunity. Now let's see if we can come up with some motivation. Whaddaya got for me?"

"Let me think." I lit up a Merit Menthol, grateful for its bite in my throat after the long smokeless stretch in the back room with all that gunpowder. "Hard to say. I been away for quite a while."

"There must be a little somethin'," Sharp persisted.

"Well, I did hear there was a little trouble between Alan and Pinky over the marshal's job earlier in the season."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah, it seems like Pinky wanted the job pretty bad, and he's been here longer'n anybody but Montana. Marshal gets a lot more money'n the other gunfighters, and Pinky's pretty far in debt. Alan didn't need the job, his folks are rich. Shoot, he'd just got back from another one of them cruises around the Caribbean he's always takin' on his folks' boat. Pinky'd been working pretty hard, without pay, getting the park ready to open, hoping it'd put him in good with that tightwad, Harold Szeluga. But Alan come back from that boat trip just before the season started and got the job himself."

"Did they fight over it?"

"Naw. Pinky don't fight with nobody."

"Why was Lucas hired instead?"

"Alan is—was—smooth. Pinky says what he thinks to anybody. And he thinks Harold's a knothed."

Sharp pulled a loose thread from a cuff button, which immediately fell off. Swearing lightly, he put the button in his shirt pocket.

"Seems to me," he said, "that Pinky oughta be madder at this Harold Whatsisface than at Alan."

"Yeah, you'd think." I took a drag on the Merit and flicked the butt through the open door. "But you never know."

"Anything else?"

"Not really, except that the only fistfight I ever saw in this crew was between Alan and Slim. But that was last year. I don't know what it was about."

"O.K., then. Let's get 'em in here."

I called Pinky in. His baby face still smiled atop those massive shoulders, but he was tight inside. I knew. I'd roomed with the big moose one summer a coupla years back and I knew him pretty well.

Sharp was relaxed. "Pinky's not your real name?"

"No. It's James Edwards."

"O.K., Mr. Edwards. I want you to tell me exactly how this one o'clock show of yours worked."

"Well, it was ad-libbed, like most of the shows. I mean, we know the story and who gets shot when, but we make up the words and little stuff as we go. It's organized, but loose."

"I just need a rough outline of where everybody was and what they was doin' throughout the show."

"O.K. Let's see. At showtime, Alan was upstairs inside Madame LaRue's. Shorty and Spear was lollin' around the boardwalk in front of the saloon. The rest of the baddies were in the saloon with Roz. Let me see, that'd be Trooper and Bear and Ray Lee. The law—that's me and Montana and Slim—we come around the corner with Terri. We stopped in front of the Last Chance and talked to Shorty and Spear about how we was gonna arrest Alan for runnin' water off of Terri's land."

"We told Shorty and Spear to call their boss out for us. Spear went upstairs into LaRue's and Shorty stayed on the boardwalk yellin' back and forth with us. Just then, Trooper comes out of the saloon with Roz. He sees the law and starts shootin'. Roz gets the wienie and goes down. Trooper jumps in the cubbyhole next to the saloon and starts shootin' from behind the crates. Shorty runs for the cubbyhole and takes a leg wound and then crawls behind the boxes with Trooper."

"What are you doin' all this time?" Sharp asked.

"We all jumped behind the wagons as soon as the shootin' started."

"Terri too?"

"Oh, yeah. So we're shootin', and Bear and Ray Lee are firing out of the Last Chance door. Then Spear comes runnin' out of LaRue's and down the stairs. Slim gives him a shotgun blast and he does a fall over the stair rail onto the boardwalk. Ray Lee and Bear make a run out of the Last Chance for the wagon by the stairs. But they don't know Montana's hidin' there and they both get the wienie in the street."

"Get the wienie?" asked Sharp.

"You know—get shot, killed," Pinky grinned.

"All right. Keep going."

"So then Trooper climbs the ladder onto the Wells Fargo office while Shorty and Alan cover him."

"The Wells Fargo. That's next door to the saloon?"

"No, the Cattlemen's Association is next to the saloon, in the little cubbyhole kind of thing with boxes and crates in it. The Wells Fargo is next to the Cattlemen's. There's a ladder in the cubbyhole that goes up on top of Wells Fargo. Trooper's goin' up and Montana pokes his head up and Shorty blows him away. Trooper starts firin' from on top and Shorty starts to follow him, but he gets shot and falls on the boardwalk. At about the same time, Lucas steps out of LaRue's door. Slim was supposed to shotgun him, but the gun jammed or somethin', so he used his pistol and the rest of us all opened up on Alan and blew him back in LaRue's."

I threw in a question. "Did you see him break his blood packs?"

"Lucas? Unh-uh. I think he broke 'em, but I don't remember actually seein' him do it. Why?"

"Never mind. Go on."

"Well, then Trooper shot Terri and winged Slim, I gave Trooper the wienie, and that was it. I ended the show and the crowd applauded and ever'body got up and went to get cleaned up."

"You didn't count heads afterwards?" asked Sharp.

Pinky shrugged and shook his head. "Naw. We usually stand around afterwards for pictures with the tourists, but after a blood show ever'body generally heads back pretty quick to clean up and change clothes."

I asked Pinky, "Is that the way the show happened or just the way it was planned?"

Pinky thought for a moment. "That's the way we planned it, but as far as I recall it came off just that way too."

"Tell me, Mr. Edwards," Sharp asked, "was there anyone who *never* had a clear shot at LaRue's balcony?"

"No. The law was all out in the street. It was a straight shot from there."

"How about the bad guys?"

"Well, I don't know. Trooper could have once he got on top of Wells Fargo. Spear fell off the stairs and rolled under the balcony. I don't think he could have, or Roz either. They was both under the balcony the whole time. Shorty maybe. I don't know if you can see the balcony good from where he was in front of the Cattlemen's. Bear and Ray Lee could have seen it once they got out in the street. But they was dead then. Hardly any of the baddies could see LaRue's from where they was when they was alive. But anyway, there wasn't nobody up there they'd want to shoot

at. The law was all out in the street, behind the— Wait a minute. You tellin' me somebody shot Lucas while the show was goin' on? But you said it happened between shows."

"We're just checkin' every possibility, Mr. Edwards. Now, tell me, could somebody have fired a shot after supposedly being dead without anyone noticing?"

Pinky grimaced and licked his teeth. "I don't know, Sheriff," he said. "Prob'ly could, I guess. The crowd might notice, but prob'ly not any of the gunfighters. You don't pay much attention to the dead ones once they're dead. You just keep your eye on whoever you're gettin' ready to kill."

Sharp leaned back and propped a boot on the desk. "Just one last question or two, Mr. Edwards," he said smoothly. "What motive would you have had for killing Alan Lucas?"

Pinky's mouth opened, and "Me?" popped out and hung there a second. Then he threw back that big blond head of his and heaved a booming laugh at us. "Me? I didn't have no reason."

The sheriff rocked a little in his chair. "I hear you had some problems with him over a job."

Pinky's eyes narrowed and he flicked a glance around at me. Then he grinned. "Oh, that was nothin'. Just a little inconvenience. We both wanted the marshal's job and he got it. No big thing."

"Weren't you angry because he got the job despite the fact that you were in debt and needed it more than he did?"

"Not much. If the jerk wanted the job bad enough to go suckin' up to that little twerp Harold the way he did, let him have it. It's not my style. Besides, if I can't pay my bills I throw them away, I don't kill some guy. I may be crazy, but I ain't stupid."

"Stupider things have been done."

"Look, Sheriff, don't try and rope me in on this. If you're lookin' for a murderer, there's lots better choices to make round here than me."

Swinging his foot off the desk, Sharp asked, "For example?"

Pinky's grin came back. "I'll give you an example. There's Slim. He's hated Alan Lucas ever since Lucas copped his girl friend and married her. Candy was Slim's girl till that slick-talkin', sweet-lookin' Lucas put the moves on her. Of course, Candy ain't been too happy with lover-boy lately herself."

"Oh?"

"Sure. Word was around that Lucas'd been playin' around after work with Terri. And last-night we were havin' a beer bust after work and Candy went out to the car and caught Alan and Terri gettin' an all-over moon tan."

Sheriff Sharp raised an eyebrow at me. I shook my head. "I don't know nothing. I didn't make the party. This is news to me."

Glee danced around Pinky's face. "Ask around, you don't believe me. Lucas tried to talk his way out of it by sayin' he was drunk and Terri'd dragged him out there by force or somethin'. Dumb cluck. All that did was get two women mad at him. So, see, I ain't the only one around here who ain't too upset to see ol' Lucas get his. Not that I wanted him dead, you know. He was an O.K. guy most of the time. But he obviously just torqued somebody off once too often. Not me though. Not me."

"All right, Mr. Edwards. That's all for now. I'll ask you not to leave the park and not to discuss this with the others."

"Whatever you say." Pinky winked at me and left the room.

Sheriff Sharp let out a loud whistling sigh, then said wistfully, "Well, who's next? Looks like it's gonna be a long evening."

Roz Kelly was next. A strong-looking blonde, about twenty, she didn't have much to offer us. She'd liked Alan Lucas, knew of no reason for anyone to kill him, and discounted the fight at the party as a mere lovers' quarrel. As for the gunfight, she'd been "killed" almost immediately, under the balcony, out of sight of Madame LaRue's and Alan for the whole show. Besides that, she hadn't carried a gun. After the show, she'd changed into clean clothes and had a nap in the back room. She hadn't seen Alan between shows.

"Montana" Bob Spurlin followed Roz and he was hardly more help. He had no quarrel with Lucas, and if he knew anyone who did he wasn't talking. Montana was the oldest man on the crew, maybe early forties, and he'd been gunfighting for seventeen years. Shorter than Pinky, Slim, and Trooper, the company skyscrapers, Montana was still a big 'un. His heavily tattooed arms looked like most folks' legs and it was rumored he once killed a man with them in a bar fight. He looked meaner than seven kinds of hell, but he had a quiet way of talking, laced with low-key humor. Montana used to run around with Terri and he might have taken unkindly to Alan bad-mouthing her the night before. But he'd "died" before Alan came out of LaRue's. You had to consider though that where Montana

died behind that wagon he could have squeezed off a later shot unseen by anyone else on the crew. And Montana could shoot the horns off a buffalo nickel at a hundred yards.

I just couldn't put much muscle to the idea that Ray Lee or Bear had done it. Besides the obvious fact that both of them got the wienie out in the street in plain view before Alan showed his face, they were both too upset. Ray Lee Spurlin, Montana's brother, and Jim "Bear" Lea were two kernels on the same cob. Husky, dark, bearded, in their late twenties, they were almost as easygoing as Pinky. In fact, I'd once shot Ray Lee in the throat with a primer that'd gotten accidentally mixed into the blank powder and he never said a word for fear of offending me. Though Sharp questioned them separately, they agreed down the line. They were real close to Alan and they couldn't believe anybody'd want him dead. Both of them cried, which could have been faked, but I didn't think so. They were awful good stuntmen, but them two fellows couldn't act their way out of a rum-soaked paper bag.

Ray Lee and Bear finished with, the sheriff sent a deputy out to take dinner orders. Harold Szeluga came in and asked a lot of questions, which we didn't answer. He was itching to let the other park employees go home since they were still on the clock. Sharp thought a moment, then told him to get names and numbers and let them go.

"You know what we got here, don't ya?" Sharp groaned after Harold had gone.

"What's that?"

"We got us a murder in front of a whole crowd of people, in broad daylight, with eleven major suspects, nine of whom are carryin' guns, three and maybe as many as eight of which are pointin' at the victim. The three who are supposed to be shootin' are doin' so, fast and furious, and nobody knows exactly who's doin' what. It seems to me just a little too weird to be true."

"I don't know, Sheriff. I think it's just the kind of thing one of these guys could think up. And it could be done. Even with these horse pistols we use there's hardly a bad shot in the bunch. 'Cept for me, of course. I couldn't hit a bull in the back with a bass fiddle."

"Of course not."

"You wanna look at the guns? Blanks turn a gun barrel blacker'n hell, but one real bullet cleans it out near shiny as new."

"Yeah, Muldoon, and one blank soots it up again too. I thought of that."

But you've shot a whole showful of blanks through them weapons since then. Let's wait till we got more to go on."

"O.K."

"Besides, whoever did it had plenty of time to ditch the piece, especially if these guys own the number of guns you say they do."

I shrugged and shifted my gunbelt where it rubbed against my hipbone. It was a little cooler now, though not much. I took off my beat-up hat and hung it on a nail by the neck cord, opened the rifle-case door, and called in the next guest.

Shorty Dugan's battered mug appeared, looking scared and a little sheepish. Before I had a chance to sit back down, the little guy started talking, half of which I nearly lost due to the good diction Shorty had lost along with his teeth once upon a time.

"Sheriff," he sputtered. "Sheriff, I don't want to get nobody in trouble, but somebody lied to you. I heard 'em."

Off came the specs. "Who, Mr. Dugan?"

"It was—it was Candy. Alan's wife. She said she watched the blood show from the boardwalk across the street, in the crowd. But she wasn't on the boardwalk. I seen her."

I stood up. "Where was she, Shorty?"

He looked worried, or maybe sad, it was hard to tell. "She was up on the roof of the undertaker's parlor."

Sharp turned to me. "Where's the undertaker's parlor?"

"Directly across the street from the Last Chance."

"What was she doin' up there, Shorty?"

"I don't know. I figgered she just went up there to watch the show. But when she told you she was on the boardwalk, I figgered I'd better tell you. I don't want to get nobody in trouble though."

"Of course you don't. Thank you, Shorty. Now do you know of any reason why anyone would want to kill Alan Lucas?"

Shorty stuttered, "I—I—no. I mean, Candy had that little fight with him last night, but she wouldn't kill him for that. She wouldn't hurt anybody. She couldn't."

"What about the others?"

There was a pause while Shorty scrunched his face up in thought, then he replied, "Well, Slim hadn't got along with Alan for a long time. And I think I saw Alan and Spear arguing this morning. I don't know what about. And then there was that thing with Pinky about the marshal's job."

"When was this argument between Spear and Alan?"

"Oh, maybe ten-thirty. Before the first show. They were out behind the Ghost Mine ride. But I didn't hear what they were sayin'."

The sheriff leaned forward and put his hands on the desk. "In this afternoon's blood show, could you see the top of LaRue's balcony from your hiding place in the cubbyhole?"

"I don't know. Maybe." Shorty looked at me with question marks.

"How about after you ran for the ladder and got 'shot'?"

"Maybe so. I don't know. Probably not. Why?"

"It's not important. I'm just curious."

Understanding slowly filled his scarred face and Shorty's eyes shot from Sharp to me and back. "You think I did it, don't you? But I couldn't have. Anyway, I told you. I saw Alan later, out in his car. Whoever did it must have done it after that." He looked terrified.

"No, Shorty," the sheriff said gently. "We know Alan Lucas was murdered during the show or moments later, so you couldn't have seen him afterwards in his car or anywhere else. Why don't you tell us the truth?"

"I am telling you the truth," whimpered Shorty. "I didn't kill him. I did see him later. I did."

Sharp gave Shorty a little rope. "Are you sure, or could it have been someone else maybe?"

Shorty stared, then brightened. "Well, it could have been. Yeah, I bet it was. I saw someone else out there. Now do you believe me?"

Sheriff Sharp looked down at the notes he'd been scribbling on and off for half an hour. "Thank you, Mr. Dugan. Please wait outside."

Shorty looked at me with a mangled smile and went out. I waited for Sharp to speak, but he didn't. "I think you're wrong if you're aiming for Shorty," I said.

Sharp groaned. "I don't know. I've got a feelin' about that boy that bothers me."

"Come on, Shorty wouldn't hurt a fly."

"That's the feelin' that's been botherin' me."

Doggies, but it was hot! Even with the sun heading west it was still like the inside of a giant baked potato in that office. Take away Oklahoma's heat and humidity and she wouldn't have nothing left but red dirt and wind. And even the wind was lying low this day.

Next came Trooper. Trooper went by that name so he wouldn't get a

lot of flak about his real name, which was Richard Burton. No kidding. Trooper was another tall, gawky kind of guy, in his mid-twenties, who wanted to be a cowboy when he grew up. He spent every dime he made on guns, hats, cavalry uniforms—you name it. Anything John Wayne or Randolph Scott ever used, Trooper had one like it.

Unfortunately, what we needed was some hard evidence, not a catalog of cowboy hardware. And Trooper's testimony was about as useful as a penny in a phone booth. If he couldn't be a cowboy, I know Trooper would have wanted to be a detective. He had all kinds of theories about the murder, involving everything but Cuban secret agents. He was a sweet slob, and he liked everybody, including Alan Lucas—so he said—but we couldn't count him out. After all, he'd been on the Wells Fargo roof in clear shot of LaRue's doorway when Alan stepped out. And he was the only baddy still legitimately firing then.

Jeremy Spear strode in, eating and scratching as always. There must be something wrong with a fellow who itches as much as Jeremy Spear scratches. He brushed some crumbs out of the beard that filled the space where most folks have chins and leaned against the front door. Spear was heavyset and dark. He laughed a lot. He was awful lazy about park chores and such and he was constantly bumming cigarettes, but outside of that I don't think you'd hate him. Long as you didn't loan him money you expected to see again.

There didn't seem much to ask him. He knew of the same arguments and grudges that everyone else did, and he mentioned a second brawl between Alan and Slim that I hadn't heard about, just a couple of weeks before. When Sharp questioned him about his argument with Alan that morning, Spear looked puzzled.

"Argument? Who told you we had an argument?"

"Shorty Dugan said he saw—"

"Shorty? Boy, what'd you guys say to him in here? He come outa here lookin' like he'd just spent the night with Dracula."

Sheriff Sharp stood up and rubbed some blood back into his bottom. "Never mind Shorty. What about this argument you had?"

I explained. "Shorty said he saw the two of you out behind the Ghost Mine about ten-thirty."

"Oh, sure—yeah, we was out there," Spear seemed relieved. "We was both pretty hungover from the party last night and we snuck back there for a beer. Harold don't allow no drinkin' during workin' hours."

"How many'd you have?" asked Sharp.

"Just one apiece, Sheriff. We wasn't drinkin' to be drinkin'. Just a little hair of the dog."

"And what was the argument about?"

"Wasn't no argument far as I know."

Spear smiled.

"Shorty thought so."

"Well, I don't know. We was just shootin' the— Wait a minute. I was tellin' Alan how the TV station chopped up *The Wild Bunch* the other night. I was pretty mad about that, it's my favorite movie. Maybe Shorty heard me tellin' Alan about that and thought we was arguin'. Could be. I was pretty sore the way the TV folks cut out all the good parts."

"TV, huh?" Sharp didn't seem too impressed.

"Sure. I get pretty excitable when I'm mad. Mighta looked like a argument. 'Course, I ain't sayin' that's what Shorty picked up on. But it could be."

"We'll leave it for now, Mr. Spear. Now will you tell us what you did during the blood show?"

Spear wrinkled his brow and took in a breath like he was gonna ask something, but he didn't. "Sure," he said. "The law was out in the street and they sent me upstairs to get Alan out of LaRue's. I went into LaRue's, and when all the shootin' started outside I run down the stairs and took a shotgun blast over the rail and rolled under the staircase. That was it for me."

Sharp walked around the desk, kicking the kinks out of his left leg. Alan's handcuffed revolver bounced on his hip. "Could you see Alan's position after you fell over the stair rail?"

"No, not really. I rolled under the stairs. Alan was still sittin' inside by LaRue's window shootin' then, I think. I don't think you can see much of LaRue's from under the stairs. Least not the end where the door is. But why all these questions about the show?"

Sheriff Sharp glared through his glasses at Spear. "Because, unlike you and Mr. Dugan, we believe Alan Lucas died *before* anyone left Fort Street after the blood show."

Spear let this roll around in his head.

"Yet you and Shorty Dugan claim you both saw him somewhat later," Sharp repeated.

"I said I thought I saw him later, I didn't say I was sure."

"Oh, come on now, Mr. Spear."

"You come on. You asked whether anyone had seen him after the one o'clock show. I saw most of the guys cleanin' up out back here and I figured I saw him then. Anyway, we see each other in the same places all day long. Maybe I saw him back here earlier, I don't know. I'm just sayin' I thought I saw him after the show, but maybe I'm wrong. It's not like I told you we played chess together and now I'm not sure who I played with."

"All right, Mr. Spear. Do you have anything else to tell us?"

"Yeah," Jeremy Spear grinned and gave us a friendly chuckle. "Don't you two boys go fryin' your chickens 'fore they're plucked."

Palomino-haired Terri McKenzie was nineteen, the youngest member of the crew. She'd had a little romance with Montana, who knows pretty when he sees it, and this had served as her introduction to gunfighting. She and Roz were dance-hall girls more often than not, but they both handled the rougher stuff just fine. Terri's story jived with everybody else's as far as the gunfight went—she hadn't seen anything unusual. And she was firm about not having a gripe with Alan.

"But what about last night's fracas?" Sheriff Sharp demanded.

"What about it?" Terri replied. "Alan asked if I wanted to go to his car for a drink and I went."

"But the party was in the park. You didn't need to go to his car for a drink, did you?"

"Alan had some Commemorativo tequila in the car and he didn't want to share it with twenty people."

"So you went for a drink. Is that all?"

"Sure."

"Then why did Alan and Candy fight over him being in the car with you?"

Terri looked around uneasily. "I don't remember any fight."

"Most ever'body else does."

"Do they? Well, I don't. Of course, I was pretty drunk. I think I remember somebody else showin' up, but I don't remember who it was and I don't remember any fight."

"You're sure you don't remember?"

"Yes! I told you I was drunk, didn't I?" Terry pushed out her lower lip unattractively.

"O.K., Miss McKenzie. You can go."

Terri started out the door, but Sharp's voice halted her.

"Oh, one more thing, Miss. Did Bob Spurlin have anything to say about your 'escapade' with Mr. Lucas?"

Terri looked at me as if she hoped I'd say something to change the subject. I didn't. "Montana?" was what she finally said. Her face flushed. She added, a little more confidently, "No, of course not. Why should he?" With that and a little flounce she made a fast exit.

Sheriff Sharp was getting tired of all this talk in the hot dusty room and I was getting a bit antsy myself. Fortunately, we only had two people left to question—Slim Parker and Candy Lucas.

Slim Parker was tall enough to hunt geese with a rake, and a mite bowlegged. Being tall that way, and bowlegged, when you saw him walking toward you it looked like a eggbeater coming down the road. The sullenness was still on his face as he entered the office and sat on a creaking cane chair. The sheriff noticed his mood.

"You angry about something, Mr. Parker?"

"Just bein' kept waitin' all day."

"Well, I know how boring these murders can be, but you can help by being clear and straightforward with us."

"Get to it then." Slim draped himself over the chair like a 1961 necktie.

Sheriff Sharp asked the usual questions, which Slim answered without volunteering nothing extra. On the subject of his fistfights with Alan, he said little except that they were personal and didn't amount to much. Subject closed.

"I understand your shotgun jammed during the blood show," Sharp said disinterestedly.

"Yeah," said Slim.

"So you used your pistol instead, when you shot at Alan Lucas?"

Slim nodded.

"Did anyone else fire at him when you did?"

"We all did. The law, that is. Alan was expecting a shotgun blast, so I told the others to fire with me. Next best thing."

Sharp squinted. "What difference does it make?"

Slim replied with a sneer. "You take a different kind of fall with a shotgun blast. More violent. I didn't want to throw Alan off. He screwed things up enough anyway without me makin' it easy for him."

Sharp asked, "Could we take a look at that shotgun, Rick?"

"It wasn't the shotgun," Slim said before I could move, "it was the shell. It misfired. Bad primer. I threw it away."

The sheriff grunted: "Don't suppose you remember where?"

"Nope."

"All right. One last question then, Mr. Parker." Sharp's specs came off. "Did you murder Alan Lucas?"

Slim's first smile of the day appeared and he threw back his head and roared with laughter. Then he grew tensely quiet and said with a sizzle through gritted teeth, "Don't you just wish? Don't we both just wish?"

Even with the tears, Candy Lucas's face looked like something men shoot each other over. She had told us of last night's quarrel, though she kept saying it was no big deal and how she never stayed too upset over Alan's flings. When Sheriff Sharp asked how often Alan'd had these "flings," Candy got real defensive, but she finally admitted it had happened a few times before, including once at some port stop on their most recent boat ride around the Caribbean. Still, she said, she'd loved Alan and could put up with his "quirks." She shed more tears and Sharp changed the subject.

As to the one o'clock gunfight, Candy had almost nothing to say. She'd watched it but she saw so many gunfights she hardly remembered how this one differed from the others.

Sharp nodded agreeably, then whipped out the last card.

"Miz Lucas, how come you lied about watchin' the show from the boardwalk?"

Candy stared straight into his eyes and pinched up her eyebrows. "What?" she said.

The sheriff repeated his question.

Candy heaved a breath and glanced at me. "Oh. Well, Harold—he's the owner—he caught some of us girls watchin' shows from the undertaker's roof last week and threatened to throw us off the park for good if we went up there again. It was an insurance risk or something. And when you asked where I watched the show from, Harold was standin' right there. I didn't want him to know I'd been up there again."

"Why the undertaker's roof?"

"You can see better and it's not crowded like the boardwalk."

"So you lied about the roof to keep from bein' banned from the park."

"Yes, sir." It was almost a whimper.

Sharp leaned toward her and clasped his hands on the desktop. "Even though your husband was dead and you probably didn't have much reason to come back to the park anyway?"

Candy looked like she'd been slapped at her birthday party. Then she crumpled into sobs. "I never thought of that."

The questioning over, Sheriff Sharp and I grabbed a couple of cold burgers left over from the deputy's dinner run. Sharp discovered that the deputies had kept the gunfighters from leaving the park but had allowed the crew free run of the grounds. He ordered the gunfighters to stay inside the office compound where, luckily, they all seemed to be anyway. As the sheriff reposted his deputies Harold Szeluga ran up with a message that Sharp was wanted on the phone. Sharp tossed half a burger on the ground and went.

When he returned he looked perturbed. I asked what was up.

"That was the coroner. Lucas died of a broken neck."

"What?"

"That's what he says: Fly in the buttermilk, ain't it?"

"Maybe not," I said, seeing a bit of light. "Come on." I hurried off with Sharp right behind.

Atop LaRue's stairs, we could see nearly the whole street—everyplace but the boardwalk directly below, the underside of the staircase, and the cubbyhole at the far end of the building. We stepped into LaRue's and examined the tarp that served as a real wall. We found no bullet holes but did see a slight brownish smear that was probably blood. The tarp was anchored only at the top and I swept it back and looked straight down onto the bumper car that had killed Alan before the bullet could finish the job.

"Pretty obvious, ain't it, son?" Sharp said. "The boy was hit up here and fell back through the tarp onto the car."

"Which means we can eliminate the idea that it happened just after the gunfight."

"I never give much thought to that in the first place, Slick. A shot after the show would have been noticed."

"Not necessarily," I countered. "After a gunfight, we often step out back and pop off a round that misfired during the show."

"Maybe so. But I think this time someone woulda remembered hearin' a later shot. Least, once that corpse was found they'da remembered."

"True." I stepped out into the dying sunlight. "Well, we're sure now. He was standing right here—"

"With nine, maybe ten guns firin' at or near him."

"And he gets hit and thrown back through the tarp."

"Simple job now. Just find the gun that did it."

"Or the bullet."

We searched everything in the probable line of fire—the walls, the doors, the windows, the stairs and railings. The only holes were from knots and nails. With maybe an hour's sun left, we gave up.

"It's no use, Slick. This wood's pretty thin anyway. Even if we found the hole, the bullet likely went clear through. And I've got something else I want to check." And the sheriff sent me down to the boardwalk while he stood in the doorway of LaRue's. I moved from place to place, checking sightlines from each gunfighter's position to the spot where Alan had stood. Most of them had had clear shooting.

Sharp called out, "Try that cubbyhole!"

I did, and could see Sharp's upper torso but only by leaning way out and twisting oddly. Directly in front of the cubbyhole was where Shorty had fallen from the ladder. Lying on the boardwalk, I could see Sharp's head and chest. Not his belly. But Alan was maybe ten inches taller than the chunky sheriff.

I moved around to the far side of the staircase and crawled beneath it to where Spear had landed. I could see nothing of Sharp. But coming back out, I saw a bit of his shirt through a large chink in one of the steps. I'd have to be Buffalo Bill to make a shot like that, but it could be done. And the staircase blocked the view of anybody on the street. Which gave us just what we needed: another possibility.

Finally, I climbed to the roof of the undertaker's parlor. It provided a perfect view of Alan's position, but other than a couple of popsicle sticks no sign of anyone's recent presence.

I rejoined Sharp by the wagon that had provided cover for Pinky, Slim, and Terri. He held up two cylindrical objects.

"Looky what I found, Muldoon. Here in the wagon."

He handed me two shotgun shells—one a live blank, the other an empty casing.

"The live one's got a clean primer. No misfire here, Slick."

"These coulda been laying here for months, Sheriff," I said.

"Yeah, and they coulda been here for only six-seven hours too." Sharp turned on his heel and headed for the marshal's office. I lit another Merit. It was getting real muggy and I pulled up my bandanna to wipe the sweat from my eyes.

Off in the west the sun was setting, not into the horizon but into a line of thunderheads that seemed to be moving our way. I muttered a little plea for rain, for some relief from this heat. But then I remembered the little shower we'd had Thursday and I thought to myself, Twice in one week? With your luck? No way. Whaddaya think this is, your birthday?

I caught up with Sharp just as he rounded the corner of Mine Street. He asked me what the Ghost Mine was.

"It's one of the kiddie rides. We just passed it." I turned and pointed to a big hulk of phony rock with tiny ore cars lined up at its base.

"Let's take a look," he said.

We traipsed around the rear of the fake mountain for several minutes. Though we didn't have any real reason to doubt Spear's story, I still didn't expect to find much sign that they'd been there. Especially since we didn't know where behind that seventy-yard-long chunk of plaster and chicken wire they might have stood.

But suddenly, there it was. At least it looked likely. On the ground lay two beer bottles and a few cigarette butts. I picked up the butts, and Sharp the bottles. One of the filtered butts was old and I couldn't make out the brand, but the other three were all Marlboros, Alan's brand. Since Spear hardly ever smoked his own, that figured about right, time-wise, for a bottle of beer each.

The sheriff handed me the bottles and sat on a nearby rock. He lit the first cigarette I'd seen him smoke. I upended an old paint bucket and sat beside him. There was a little beer residue in each bottle. I emptied the drops on the ground and the two of us smoked silently.

There was a slogan of some kind printed in little-bitty letters around the edge of each bottle's label. I squinted, trying to read them little words, turning the bottle in my hand and scraping dried mud off where it covered the words. Something about artesian wells and a thousand lakes or creeks or something with water in it.

"You reckon?"

I snapped out of dreamland. "What was that?" I asked.

"I said, I don't guess two fellows'd sit around drinkin' beer and smokin' cigarettes in the middle of an argument, do you?"

"You wouldn't think so, would you?"

Without another word we stood and walked back to the marshal's office.

As we reached the office, I asked Sharp; "Whatcha gonna do now?"

"Well, I'm not sure, Slick." He pulled the two shotgun shells from his breast pocket. "I'm not sure. But I got a halfway good idea."

"Slim?"

"I ain't sayin'." The sheriff grinned tightly. "But if I'm wrong, maybe this'll draw our man out."

"Man?" I asked slyly.

"Figger of speech, son, figger of speech."

Inside the back room, things were in an uproar. The crew had gathered inside as we approached the building and now they was demanding that something be done, something other than just holding them till half past Christmas.

"Settle down, settle down," Sharp said evenly.

"Whaddaya mean, settle down? You've had us boxed up here for hours. When're you gonna do something?" Slim hollered belligerently. Several voices played the echo.

"It won't be long now. If you'll just calm down—"

"Sheriff, we know you're doin' your job," interrupted Pinky, "and we know how serious it is. But you can't hold all of us forever. You've gotta decide somethin' soon, whether to hold somebody or to not hold anybody. You can't just sit on all of us. Some of us are married or have other responsibilities." Pinky paused. "I know this ain't important in itself, but I've got a load of wet laundry over at the motel laundromat that's been ready to go in the dryer since noon." Most everybody laughed and the tension let up a little.

Then, there it was. The answer. All at once I felt that little cartoon-lightbulb go on over my head. The key to the whole mahoney was there in one word: laundry.

But I had to be sure. "Sheriff," I yelled as I ran for the door, "don't do nothing till I get back!" I caught a glimpse of surprised faces as I dashed into the darkness.

I was a little winded as I reached the parking lot at the north end of

the park. Alan's car was off to one side, by itself in the near-empty lot. I took a wheezing lope up to the car. It was locked.

I trotted over to my own vehicle, a pickup, and found the coat hanger I keep in the bed for emergencies. Back to Alan's car with more wheezing, I twisted the coat hanger through a window, between the glass and the doorframe. I was in luck. The car was an older model, without the metal strip newer cars have to guard against such entry. With a little finagling, I looped the wire around the lock post, yanked, and opened the door.

I wasn't certain where to look, or even what for, but that didn't keep me from finding it pretty quick. I hoped to find a spare key that might open the trunk. I thought Alan might have been dumb enough to keep one under the floor mat, but apparently he wasn't. Then, as I knelt by the door to replace the mat, I saw the gun. It was lying under the driver's seat, still in its holster, with the gunbelt wrapped around it. I pulled the whole thing out. I didn't recognize the .44 magnum, but I knew that hand-tooled belt. I'd admired it for years.

I looked around the car's interior for any more surprises. There wasn't much. Alan kept his car immaculate, damn near sterilized, but even clean cars sometimes collect a little dirt. I found Alan's in the crevice between the seat and the seatback. I pulled out a quarter, a ballpoint pen, an empty shell casing, and a soda straw before I found what interested me. It was a little strip of soft thin plastic, maybe one-quarter inch by two inches, with a crease running down it lengthwise. It looked like the top edge of a heat-sealed plastic bag, the part that tears off when it's opened. There was no sign of the bag itself, if there was one. Not that it mattered. There was just the tiniest speck of something trapped in one corner of the strip. A speck, but enough.

I took the pistol, belt, and plastic strip with me and closed Alan's car. My next target, a station wagon, late-sixties model, stood maybe twenty yards off. With my trusty coat hanger, I went to the car and pulled the same routine. It took a little longer to find anything, but this time I knew what I was looking for. When I found it, I thanked the car salesman who made the deal on this station wagon. I might never have got the trunk lid open.

It was pretty dark when I got back to the office. Everyone was milling around when I walked in, but they quieted down pretty quick. I'd wrapped the gun and rig in my vest and I laid the whole bundle on the loading bench. Then I turned to the puzzled faces before me.

"Most of you probably know by now," I began, "Alan Lucas was killed during this afternoon's blood show. Not after it. During.

"Now whoever killed Alan was a pretty smart banana. He, or she—I'll say 'he' to save my breath—figgered there was plenty of people around with halfway decent reasons for wanting to get even with Alan. And he realized that this gunfight would put just about every gunfighter in the position of pointing guns at Alan for enough time to confuse the issue, and he figgered he could pump one real bullet into Lucas without anyone being able to trace it. Not before he had time to ditch the gun. And he knew he'd probably have lots of time before anyone found the body.

"Now you, whoever you are, had one bit of bad luck. The bullet didn't kill Alan, at least not right off. But you didn't know that 'cause there weren't no way for you to check on it once you fired that one real bullet. And one bullet was all you could risk. Even if you got caught, one slug could be an accident. A terrible, awful accident for sure, but an accident. But nobody'd ever believe two accidental bullets. Fortunately for you, your luck got good again. Alan fell through the back wall of LaRue's and broke his neck. I say fortunate because Alan was the one person who could have accused you. He alone knew that you had shot him, shot him not when he stepped out onto the balcony, as we first thought, but seconds before, as he stood firing through LaRue's open window."

Sheriff Sharp's glasses and his jaw hit the floor at almost the same moment. When he'd picked them both up, he said, "Them windows are big but not all that big. A man'd have to be a real fair shootist to hit a man that far away through a window."

"Maybe," I replied, "but no better than most of these folks here. Of course, he'd have to worry about Alan not showing up in LaRue's door on cue, but he had a pretty good alibi and he could always holler accident if things got too tight.

"Now as it turns out, the whole distance thing don't mean much. I was thrown by the fact that Alan *did* show up in LaRue's door more or less on time. That was the one real accident of the whole shebang, Alan having enough strength left to walk those coupla steps before falling down and outa LaRue's. The whole plan probly would have worked anyway if it weren't for one item."

The room was stone quiet. Not a board creaked.

"I shoulda caught it when ever'bady was talking about cleaning up after the blood show. In fact, I shoulda caught it when the sheriff and I first

examined the body. But it took Pinky's laundry to kick my brain into gear. There was powder flakes imbedded in Alan's shirt."

Someone broke the silence. Montana. "But we've all got powder in our clothes. Ever'body catches spray sometime during the day."

"In our regular shirts, yeah. They don't get washed that often. But ever'body's got a old spare shirt he uses for blood shows, something he don't mind getting bloodstains on. Those shirts get washed right after every blood show in the buckets out back. That's the only way to get the blood out, and even then it don't all come out. That's why we use old shirts. And washing gets rid of powder flakes."

Ray Lee spoke up. "But when Alan got shot, everyone who was shootin' was twenty or thirty feet away. Blanks—"

"You're right. Our blanks don't pack enough compression to spray powder thirty feet. But a live bullet from eight feet would leave powder traces. And that's how far Jeremy Spear was from Alan Lucas when he killed him."

Several voices cried out as all faces turned toward Spear. The dirty beard opened for a smile as Spear said coolly, "You're crazy. I'm almost the only one here who didn't want Lucas dead. And even if I did, how you gonna prove I did it, or that it wasn't an accident?"

I studied the old boy evenly and answered, "You did a mighty fair job with this, even if you did take some big chances. But you blew your own game with a few little foulups. First, you let Shorty see you arguing with Alan this morning."

"We weren't arguin'. I explained that."

"And I believed you. But you weren't sure I did, so you tried to shore up your story by planting evidence. The cigarette butts were a nice touch, but you blew it with the beer bottles. It hasn't rained in three days. The ground's dry. But your bottles had dry mud caked on them. How do fresh beer bottles get so caked with mud that you can't read the labels? I figger you went around after our talk and found some empties lying around and planted them to make your story more believable. You were smart enough to make sure there was still some dregs in them, but you forgot about mud from Thursday's rain."

"You can't prove anything by that, even if you could prove *that!*"

"Oh, but I'm only beginning. Your second slip was letting Shorty see you again, this time in Alan's car."

Shorty jumped up from his haunches. "It was him I saw?"

I nodded. "You're a quick thinker, Spear. When Shorty said he'd seen Alan after the killing, you knew it was you he'd seen. You saw the chance to take focus off *who* was in the car by supporting the idea that Alan was still alive, which added to the mystery of *when* he died. So you spoke right up and said you'd also seen Alan between shows. Only you weren't sure, which gave you room to backtrack and which also made Shorty look bad because he thought he *was* certain."

Spear was getting edgy and a little vicious. "You're fulla balloon juice," he snapped. "You can't make any of this stick."

"You knew we'd confiscate the guns when we found Alan's body," I continued, "so you went to your car for a spare. But you couldn't bear to throw away that beautiful .44 and you didn't want to risk hiding it in your own car, so you got smart and hid it in the victim's car—it'd be safe there, and even if someone found it it wasn't licensed so it couldn't be traced to you. Anyone would think it was just part of Alan's collection. But the gun was in a closed-end holster and the piece you switched to was a long-barreled Colt. I saw it in the three o'clock show. The long barrel wouldn't fit the other holster, so you made your third mistake. You switched rigs too. You'd have been O.K. on this count if you hadn't left the gunbelt in Alan's car. But you did. And I recognized it."

"All that proves is that I left one of my rigs in Alan's car." Spear was getting back some confidence. "Why would I have killed him anyway? There's ten better reasons than I've got right here in this room."

"Maybe so. But look at this." I held up the filmy strip of plastic. "Sheriff, I don't know aspirin from M&Ms, but I figger that little bit of powder in the edge of this plastic thing just might be cocaine, maybe heroin. I found this in the seat of Alan's car. The way I figger it, Alan was bringing the stuff back with him from his Caribbean cruises. Maybe Spear found out what Alan was dealing and wanted a cut. Maybe they had a deal and one of them reneged. Whatever it was, they argued over it, Spear killed Alan, and took the stuff. Like I said, I don't know much about drugs, but I figger there's ten or fifteen thousand dollars' worth of the stuff crammed into the hollow jackstand of Spear's station wagon."

With a terrible growl, Spear leaped at me. I was expecting something like that, but it made me jump back anyway. Pinky and Montana put their vise grips on Spear and held him easily.

"You figger!" he screamed. "You figger! Have you figgered out how you're gonna prove any of this?"

"You're giving me a lot of help," I told him. I walked to the loading bench and carefully unwrapped Spear's gunbelt. I held it up. "Maybe I can't prove anything, but I'll bet you dollars to doughnuts the Oklahoma City crime lab'll prove these are your prints on this gun. And that this—" I pulled an object from my watch pocket—"is the bullet you fired from this gun into Alan Lucas."

Spear slumped, then said in a low whimper, "That can't be the bullet. That bullet went clear through him. From where he was standin', it must have kept goin' on through LaRue's and clean over the midway somewhere."

"Not if you shot him inside LaRue's. It would have lodged in the far wall, where we wouldn't ordinarily have looked. But don't worry about that now. It's all over, Spear."

"Why?"

"Because no one touched the body while you was there. The only person besides Sheriff Sharp and me who knew that bullet went clear through Alan is the man who saw it happen."

Spear didn't have nothing to say after that.

The deputies took him into town and after a lot of questions and backslapping the other gunfighters drifted off. Candy had learned some new things about Alan today, and while she looked me in the face I felt it in my gut. I think both of us were a little mad at me, but in the end she hugged me and cried on my shoulder. Roz took her home.

Sheriff Sharp offered me a ride to the police station, but I opted for my truck. I showered and changed to street clothes and drove into town.

I shook hands with Sharp in his office in the Wetoka police station and made some kind of promise to stop by again sometime. Then he took off his glasses and looked me hard in the eye.

"Let me ask you somethin', Muldoon," he said. "How'd you ever find that bullet after sunset anyway? You couldn'ta seen worth a hoot inside LaRue's even if you knew where to look."

"This thing?" I held up the chunk of lead. "This is mine; a little good-luck piece they dug outa my leg in Vietnam."

"Well, I'll be— But wait a minute. I can't go to trial without the real bullet. He may weasel-outa that confession. I gotta have that bullet."

"Just keep lookin' in the west wall of LaRue's," I said. "You'll find it."

He did.



CRIME ON SCREEN

by Peter Christian

"Goot Eeev-nink." The figure is sardonic, elegant in evening kit, slicked-back hair glistening, the eyes in a leering squint, rich lips pulled back in a troubling smile. It is Bela Lugosi as the vampiric Count Dracula, a role he personified to the death, a role for which he provided the mold for all future representations. Cinema scholar Richard Bojarski in his recent study, *The Films of Bela Lugosi* (Citadel Press, \$16.95), reminds us, though, that Lugosi's screen persona extended far beyond the mountains of Transylvania—that despite what critics have called a one-note level of portrayal Lugosi, in a career which embraced more than sixty films after *Dracula*, made notable contributions to the melodrama genre.

Surprisingly, even though Lugosi's greatest successes paralleled in time those of his screen rivals, Boris Karloff and Lon Chaney Jr., he was actually born a year earlier than the *senior* Lon Chaney, who had achieved horror stardom a generation before. Like Karloff (who was five years his junior), fame was to come to him only in middle years.

As a youth—the son of a baker—Lugosi had played a variety of roles on the Hungarian stage, and had worked extensively in European films, even playing the Indian, Chingachgook, in a German version of *The Last of the Mohicans*. Hungarian political troubles forced him to make a hasty exit for America, where despite difficulties with the language he managed to obtain some stage parts, although his strong accent limited him to such roles as sheikhs and brigands.

The famed publisher-producer, Horace Liveright, had just purchased American rights to a stage version of Bram Stoker's vampire novel, *Dracula*, which had been extremely successful in England, both in London and the provinces. He was looking for an actor to play the foreign count, and someone remembered Lugosi: his powerful, guttural accent, and the fact he wore evening clothes well (the count is seen in nothing else). Lugosi nearly refused the part, feeling that while the play revolved around the title role, he was not on stage enough. But those few moments we do see Dracula, making his entrances in main halls and bedrooms, or in his coffin in a crumbling abbey cellar, are electrifying.

The critics were very good-spirited about the play, calling it—we must remember this is a more innocent day—blithely bloodcurdling and rich in horror. “Lugosi, a massive fellow with just the right cast of countenance and Magyar accent, made the vampire count really sinister.” He was stamped with the role, and indeed to this day his is the face which is used to illustrate Dracula. Actually—much like Karloff and Basil Rathbone, two other players with similar career difficulties—Lugosi had mixed feelings about being identified so closely with a single part. He was to say later that “where once I had been the master of my professional destinies, with a repertoire embracing all kinds and types of men, from Romeo to the classics of Ibsen and Rostand, I became Dracula's puppet. The shadowy figure of Dracula, more than any casting office, dictated the kinds of parts I played . . . Never, surely, has a role so influenced and dominated an actor's personal life and private fortunes . . .”

Dracula played for nearly a year on Broadway, then toured the country, finally enjoying a long run in Los Angeles. While playing in California, Lugosi managed to do quick film jobs at the movie studios—strangely enough, his stage success cut very little ice with casting directors, so many of his early screen roles were unbilled! His most interesting role was Inspector Delzante of Calcutta in a film version of the stage thriller, *The Thirteenth Chair*, using a seance to unmask a murderer. Then Universal Studios bought the movie rights to *Dracula*.

At first the studio thought to use a more familiar actor to play the count—Conrad Veidt and Paul Muni were suggested—but the role finally went to Lugosi, seven weeks' work at five hundred dollars a week, all he ever received for what ultimately became Universal's gold mine. The film was phenomenally successful, and Lugosi's career seemed on the upswing. When the studio next decided to make Mary Shelley's *Franken-*
CRIME ON SCREEN

stein, Lugosi was tested for the part of the monster, but rejected it as the creature had no lines to speak. He thought the part inconsequential. Another unknown, Boris Karloff, lumbered to fame in the film; Lugosi had in a sense paved the way for an arch rival.

Karloff was more than mere menace, he could manipulate pathos on screen far more skillfully than Lugosi; what's more, his English was intelligible, while Lugosi throughout his life was troubled with a thick accent which hampered his interpretation of roles. As a result, Karloff's career embraced a wide spectrum of parts, while Lugosi found himself confined mainly to the sinister.

Lugosi was associated with some of the best attempts to adapt Edgar Allan Poe to the American screen in the Thirties. The year after *Dracula*, he starred as Dr. Mirakle in an impressionistic, nightmarish version of *Murders in the Rue Morgue* (1932). There is no Dr. Mirakle in the Poe story, you say? For sure, and not much else in the heavily Germanic film matches exactly Poe's narrative—the ape in this version, for instance, is no sailor's escaped pet but the highly trained experiment of a scientist madly dabbling in evolution—but the *spirit* is genuinely akin to Poe's; as are the striking, dark visuals: the eerie, Caligariesque amusement park, the crooked roofs and winding alleys of the oldest sections of Paris.

The Black Cat, in 1934, has actually nothing specific connecting it with Poe's tale, yet it is such a bizarre tale of devil worship in the Balkans and brooding vengeance that it seems the moody quintessence of Poe. Here Lugosi has an unusually sympathetic role, opposite a demonic Karloff, the master engineer who has built his dark fortress home on the site of a battlefield where thousands died, "the greatest graveyard in the world," and where he plays Bach somberly on a cathedral organ. There are many memorable scenes, as when Karloff faces Lugosi across a chessboard: "We understand each other. We know too much of life. Let us play a little game—a game of death, if you will . . ."

In *The Raven* (1935), Lugosi gets some of his own back—as Dr. Vollin, the Poe-obsessed surgeon driven mad by love who has all of the torture instruments of Poe's stories handily reconstructed behind secret passages in his rambling house! Here, for a lark, Lugosi gets to disfigure Karloff and eliminate his enemies while rallying to the heavens: "Poe, you are avenged!!" So grim and grotesque was the climax of this film that it led the British Board of Film Censors to ban American horror films—which cut down on their production here, putting Lugosi out of work.

Actually, as the determined Mirakle ("Will my search *never* end?"), as the sympathetic, avenging Dr. Vitus Werdegast in *The Black Cat* ("Fifteen years I've rotted. Now I've come back. Not to kill you—but to kill your *soul*."), as the Poe-ologist Vollin, gleefully poking about his pit and pendulum, Lugosi exhibited a range and sensitivity that was remarkably good—despite latter-day criticism calling him a narrow artist. ("If you are not serious, people will sense it. No matter how hokum or highly melodramatic the part may be, you must believe in it while you are playing it.") Among other roles in which Lugosi *must* have believed strongly, for he was good in them, were the "white yogi," Chandu the Magician, in *The Return of Chandu*, the legendary Haitian necromancer, Murder Legendre, in *White Zombie*, and especially the crazed shepherd, Ygor, in *Son of Frankenstein*. Ygor, broken-necked (he has survived a hanging), flute-playing, roguish, friend and protector of Frankenstein's creation, was originally a small role ("he was first a little part but every day the director makes him bigger and bigger and finally he is the biggest part in the picture"), but ultimately Lugosi managed to steal the film from a very impressive trio of co-stars, all skilled scene-thieves themselves: Karloff, Basil Rathbone, and Lionel Atwill.

Lugosi also excelled as a red herring, an essential ingredient in mystery film: the suspect who is *not* the killer, the smokescreen which keeps you from guessing right. In *Night of Terror* he is the suspicious turban-wearing Hindu servant in an old-dark-house yarn revolving about a man buried in suspended animation for a week while a murderer is loose above ground. (MANIAC KILLS TWO MORE, screams a headline.) The gimmick is interesting. In *Night Monster*, mysterious murders happen after a rich, crusty invalid summons the doctors he thinks have crippled him (Lugosi is among them) to his gloomy mansion in the middle of a bog. When the crickets stop chirping, the deaths will start. Despite its "B" formula, the film is worth your watching. Even Alfred Hitchcock liked it.

Good Lugosi mystery—like his moving, sympathetic performance in *The Invisible Ray*, or his surprisingly devious one in the Edgar Wallace whodunit, *Dark Eyes of London*, a grim tale of blind killers—is very good indeed. And even bad Lugosi, those quickie melodramas to which his career finally descended (*Bowery at Midnight* and all the rest), were improved by his presence. The actor died in 1956, and was buried—at his request—in his Dracula cape. The role certainly had enshrouded him in life, and has given him immortality on the mystery screen.

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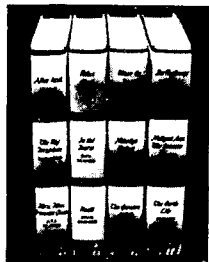
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